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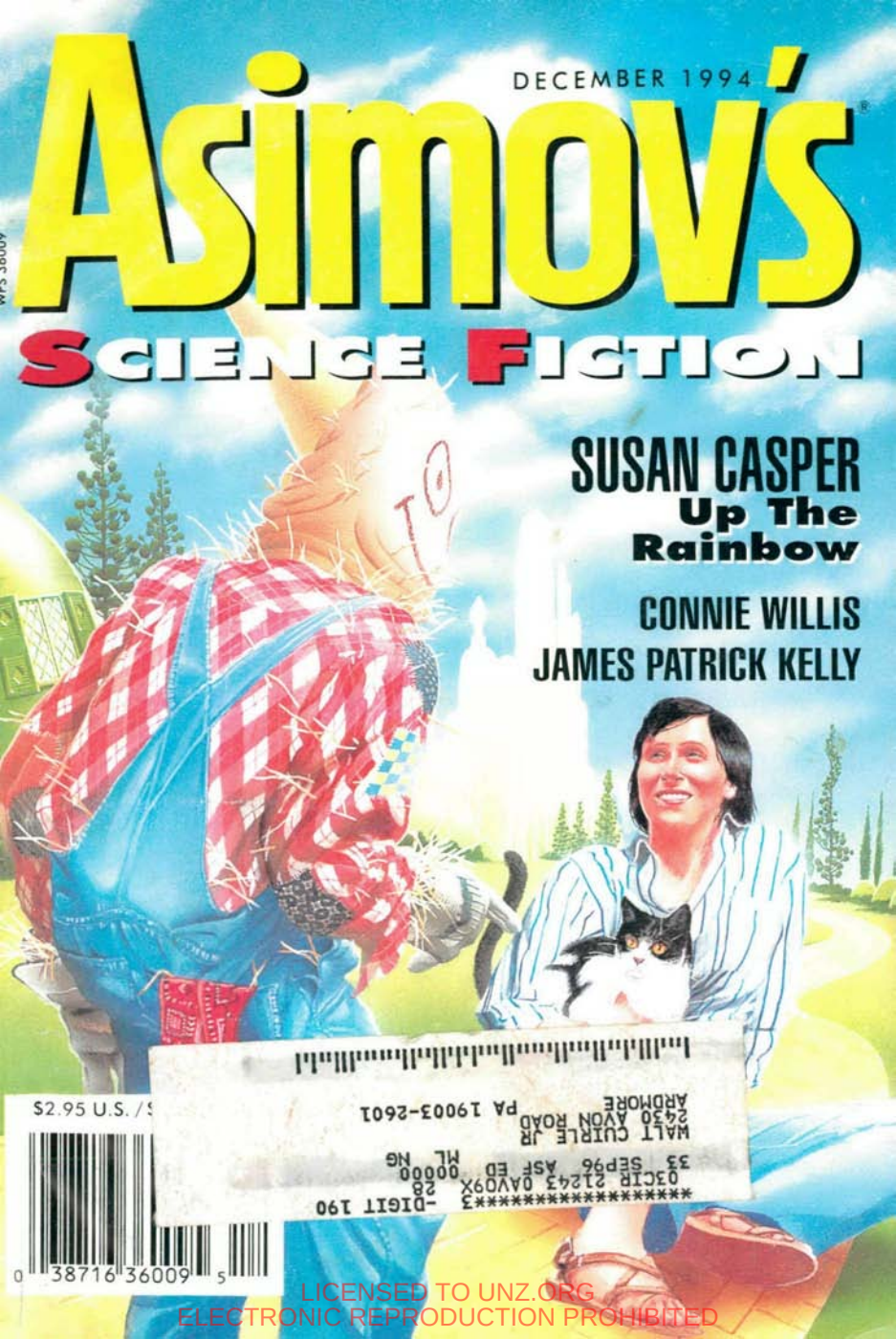

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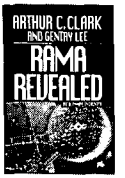

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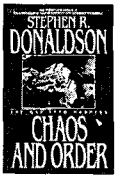

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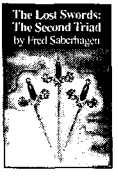

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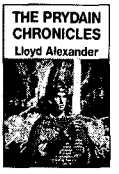

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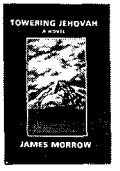

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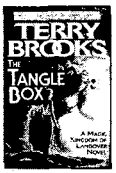

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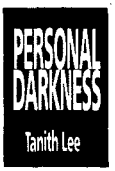

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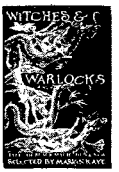

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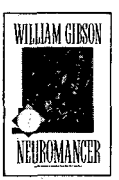

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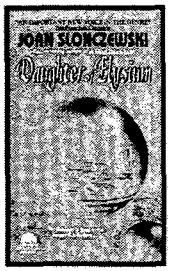

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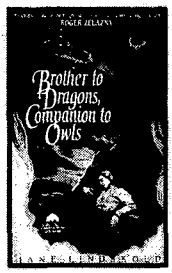

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REFLECTIONS by Robert Silverberg

The Japanese stock market has been floating downward, downward, ever downward over the past couple of years —not exactly crashing, just gliding lower and lower in a decline that has not had the dramatic impact of our own 1929 and 1987 market cataclysms but which has had a pretty nasty effect on the prosperity of Japan's investing community all the same. The Japanese real-estate market has been suffering through the same kind of drop. According to figures I saw in the New York *Times*'s business section a few months back, the total loss of value since early 1990 in Japanese stocks and real estate now has reached six *trillion* dollars.

What have the Japanese—those incredibly disciplined, diligent, brainy, hard-working folk—done wrong to land themselves in such a dire mess? And what lessons can we learn from it?

What the Japanese did, basically, was to sell each other a lot of $10,000 puppies and pay for them with $5,000 kittens. (An old joke. Small boy comes home with a new puppy. "Where did you get it?" his father asks. "I bought it from Joey," the boy says. "It's worth $10,000." Father lifts an eyebrow. "And just where did you get $10,000?" "Oh, I didn't pay cash. I traded him two $5,000 kittens for it.")

When the Japanese economy began its spectacular upward surge in the early 1980s, fueled by low interest rates at home and a resurgence of economic prosperity in the United States—Japan's chief customer—the owners of land and buildings were among the prime beneficiaries. Japan has a total land area of about 143,000 square miles, which is roughly 90 percent of the size of the state of California. About 80 percent of that is composed of rugged, uninhabitable mountains. Some 125 million people live in the remaining territory, most of them crammed into the coastal plains. The population density of the urban areas is immense and there is no great reserve of undeveloped land for commercial expansion and residential growth.

The great Japanese economic boom of a decade ago sent the price of real estate shooting upward at an astonishing rate. We began hearing amazing stories about the market value of property in Tokyo. The cheapest parcels of land in downtown Tokyo rose to the stratosphere: the asking price was about

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$77,000 per square meter. (The size of a small bath-mat, basically.) A tiny house sitting on a sliver of land suddenly was valued in the millions of dollars. (The value of the one-acre Tokyo estate of tycoon Kyofumi Moroto was estimated in 1988 to be three *hundred* million dollars.) A ramshackle office building that could be demolished and replaced with something bigger fetched a price worthy of Rockefeller Center. (The 2.15-acre site of a burned-out hotel in central Tokyo was put on the market at 1.8 billion dollars.) The land under the Imperial Palace (sacred and untouchable, of course) was deemed to be worth something more than the entire property value of Manhattan Island.

Were the new land prices crazy? Of course. Would the boom ever end? The Japanese didn't think so. It *couldn't* happen—for the self-fulfilling reason that if it did, "the entire Japanese economy would topple," as one new billionaire put it.

During the period of panicky buying of land in Tokyo, some shrewd people cashed out and got very, very wealthy on the sale of property which had cost them an invisible fraction of the selling price, many years earlier. But a lot of the realty millionaires and billionaires tended to hang on to their property *and use it as collateral for loans*.

Why not? Wasn't the price of real estate shooting upward without limit? Why sell, when the banks were glad to lend you millions for

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something that had cost you only thousands? You could take those bank loans and invest them in the stocks on the Tokyo Stock Exchange—which was also skyrocketing in a breathtaking way—and make even more millions, while still continuing to own the land that was the foundation of your wealth.

Takaaiki Wakasugi, a professor of finance at Tokyo University and the University of Michigan, pronounced the epitaph for that giddy era when he observed, "In the late 1980s, people were living in a dream. They did not understand reality. Right now, in a sense, we're in a state of chaos because of that."

It was all a little like Cyrano de Bergerac's method of climbing to the Moon by throwing a hook into the sky, pulling himself up, and tossing the hook higher still. The system works very well if you can get your hook to hold. As money poured into prosperous, hard-working Japan, the huge Japanese banks funneled it to private investors and corporations in the form of loans against the collateral of vastly inflated real estate, and the borrowers used the money to buy stocks, masterpieces of painting, American office buildings and golf courses, even Hollywood studios.

Trouble started when the Japanese economy finally began to contract a little, as even the most prosperous of economies will do. (The strength of the Japanese yen eventually made Japanese products too expensive for overseas consumers, and other Asian countries employing cheaper labor started to cut into the Japanese companies' markets; the hectic boom had meanwhile led to overexpansion of Japanese factory capacity and a costly buildup of unsold inventories; regressive Japanese regulatory and tax policies created other problems.) As the air started leaking out of the Japanese bubble, the banks began calling in their loans.

You have borrowed money against your litter of $5000 kittens, and you have used it to buy some $10,000 puppies. Now the bank wants its money back. Where do you get it?

You can always sell a few of your kittens, can't you? Aren't they worth $5000 each? Sure they are: so long as a buyer is available at that price. But suddenly nobody feels like paying $5000 for a kitten. Even when you mark the price down to $3500 there are no takers. And none at $2500, either. All the buyers of fancy kittens seem to have other uses for their money these days.

How about those $10,000 puppies, then? It turns out that there's also not a lot of demand for them. You shop them around at $6000, $4000, $2000. No go.

The bank is insistent, now. But you can't pay off the loan with cash; the best you can do is deliver some baskets of cats and dogs to your friendly banker. That's what collateral is for, after all: if you can't meet the loan, the bank gets

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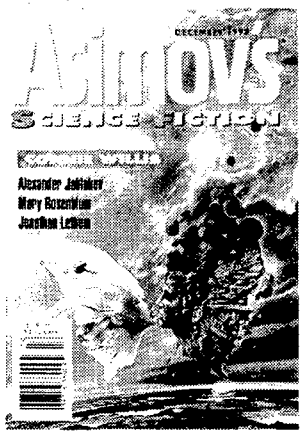

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Which is okay for you, maybe. But now the banks, which dished out all that real money on the basis of goofy collateral, are being asked to make new loans to refloat the capsized Japanese economy. And they can't easily do so, because so much of their capital is tied up in repossessed cats and dogs, and Sony and Mitsubishi and Matsushita can't use cats and dogs to revive their businesses: they need hard currency. So the stocks of the companies that can't get bank loans take another beating.

Worse, the banks were investing significant chunks of their capital in those very stocks—not just lending money to the big corporations, in other words, but buying their shares. As the Tokyo stock quotations plummet, bank capital is further impaired, imposing new limitations on the amount that the banks can lend. So the downward spiral into economic contraction goes on and on.

The Japanese government has been trying to intervene in various ways in order to save the situation—first by raising interest rates in a failed attempt to halt the bizarre speculation of the 1980s, then by propping up the Tokyo stock market through the use of government pension funds to buy stocks. The results so far have been unimpressive; but sooner or later things will take a turn for the better over there, as natural correc-

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tive processes take hold in the way they always ultimately do in a major industrial country.

Meanwhile, of course, there are a lot of deflated billionaires in Japan—still quite wealthy, of course, but badly shaken by their bumpy ride. The sixty-eight Tokyo office buildings owned by eighty-four-year-old Taikichiro Mori were valued at eighteen billion dollars in 1988, making him the world's second richest man. Five years later, Mori was dead and his sons were presiding over a realty empire with a new estimated worth of $7.5 billion. Most of us could get along nicely on that; but $11.5 billion of supposed wealth has vanished, and the rest is threatened by problems of heavy debt burdens, declining rents, and an illiquid market. "We're now in the fog," admitted Akira Mori in July 1993.

And what are we who write or read science fiction, and who therefore spend much of our time thinking about the patterns of things to come, to make of all this?

For SF writers, the horrendous comeuppance of the Japanese speculative boom is yet another reminder of the dangers of open-ended straight-line extrapolations. Trends don't continue indefinitely in the same direction. Correctives always intervene. "No tree grows to the sky," Wall Street people like to tell each other, though it's a truism more frequently honored after the fact than otherwise.

Do you remember the widespread popular belief at the time of the oil crisis of 1973—when the OPEC nations suddenly quadrupled the price of crude oil—that the Western economies would crumble and that all the wealth in the world would wind up in the hands of the oil-rich Arabs? It was a plausible enough scenario for the moment; but the increase in the price of oil brought forth a worldwide increase in the *supply* of oil, as prospectors got busy everywhere, and the economic disruptions caused by the oil crisis created a worldwide business slump that eventually forced the OPEC sheiks to rescind their price hike. Today we remain largely dependent on Arab oil, and are likely someday to be in big trouble for that, but meanwhile oil is cheaper (adjusted for inflation) than it was twenty years ago, and the Arab nations are very far from owning the world.

So too with the Japanese. They are dedicated and hard-working people and will be tough competitors in the years ahead. But, as the collapse of their real-estate and stock-market bubbles has shown, even they have not yet managed to repeal the rational laws underpinning the cycles of economic activity. What goes up, as they say, usually will come down—as has happened dramatically in Tokyo. ●

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It's hard to cram all the news we have about Connie Willis into one short blurb. Once again, her fiction has enjoyed a banner year: "Death on the Nile" (*Asimov's,* March 1993) was a finalist for the Nebula and the Bram Stoker horror award, and it is currently a Hugo-award nominee; "Inn" (*Asimov's,* December 1993) won our Readers' Award; and "Close Encounter" (*Asimov's,* September 1993) won the Locus Poll for Best Short Story. Another Locus Award went to *Impossible Things,* Ms. Willis's 1993 collection of stories—of which all but one originally appeared in *Asimov's.* The author's most recent book, *Uncharted Territory,* was published by Bantam/Spectra last summer. A brilliant short novel about the computer graphics revolution in Hollywood, *Remake,* will be out in January.

Illustration by Laurie Harden

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"Heap on more wood! The wind is chill;
But let it whistle as it will,
We'll keep our Christmas merry still."
—Sir Walter Scott

Marley was dead, to begin with.

Dickens' story, *A Christmas Carol,* however, of which the aforementioned is the first sentence, is alive and well and available in any number of versions. In the books department of Harridge's, where I work, we have nineteen, including a Disney *Christmas Carol,* the Muppets' *Christmas Carol,* the CuddlyWuddlys' *Christmas Carol,* and one with photographs of dogs dressed as Scrooge and Mrs. Cratchit.

We have also an assortment of *Christmas Carol* cookbooks, Advent calendars, jigsaw puzzles, and an audiotape on which Captain Picard of the American television series, *Star Trek: The Next Generation,* takes all the parts.

All of these are, of course, adaptations, shortened and altered and otherwise bowdlerized. No one reads the original, though we carry it, in paperback. In the two years I've worked here, we've only sold a single copy, and that to myself. I bought it last year to read to my daughter Gemma when I had her for Christmas, but then I had not had time to do so. My ex-wife Margaret had come to pick her up early for a pantomime she and Robert were taking her to, and we only got as far as Marley's ghost.

Gemma knows the story, though, in spite of never having read it, and the names of all the characters, as does everyone. They are so well-known, in fact, that at the beginning of the season this year Harridge's management had suggested the staff dress in costume as Scrooge and Tiny Tim, to increase profits and "provide a seasonal atmosphere."

There was a general outcry at this, and the idea had been dropped. But on the morning of the twenty-second when I arrived at work, there was a figure in a floor-dragging black robe and a hood standing by the order desk with Mr. Voskins, who was smiling smugly.

"Good morning, Mr. Grey," Mr. Voskins said to me. "This is your new assistant," and I half-expected him to say, "Mr. Black," but instead he said pleasedly, "the Spirit of Christmas Future."

It is actually Christmas Yet to Come, but Mr. Voskins has not read the original either.

"How do you do?" I said, wondering if Mr. Voskins was going to demand that I wear a costume as well, and why he had hired someone just now. The books department had been shorthanded all of December.

"Mr. Grey will explain things to you," Mr. Voskins said to the Spirit. "Harridge's has been able to arrange for an author autographing," he said to me, which explained why this hiring three days before Christmas.

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No doubt the book being autographed was yet another version of *A Christmas Carol*. "We will be holding it the day after tomorrow."

"On Christmas Eve?" I said. "At what time? I'd arranged to leave early on Christmas Eve."

"It will depend on the author's schedule," Mr. Voskins said. "He's an extremely busy man."

"My daughter's spending the evening with me," I explained. "It's the only time I'll have her." They would be at Robert's parents in Surrey for the rest of Christmas week.

"I'm discussing the details with the author this morning," he said. "Oh, and your wife telephoned. She wants you to ring her back."

"Ex-wife," I corrected him, but he had already hurried off, leaving me with my new assistant.

"I'm Mr. Grey," I said, extending my hand.

The Spirit silently extended a skinny hand for me to shake, and I remembered that the Spirit of Christmas Yet to Come was mute, communicating solely by pointing.

"Have you worked in a books department before?" I asked.

He shook his hooded head. I hoped he didn't plan to stay in character while waiting on the customers, or perhaps that was the idea, and he was here for "seasonal atmosphere" only.

"What am I supposed to call you?" I said.

He extended a bony finger and pointed at the *Wild West Christmas Carol,* on the cover of which a black-hatted Spirit stood pointing at a tombstone with Scrooge's name on it.

"Spirit? Christmas? Yet to Come?" I said, thinking that an "atmospheric" assistant was worse than none at all.

But I was wrong. He proved to be very efficient, learning the cash register and the credit card procedure with ease and waiting on customers promptly. They seemed delighted when he extended his bony finger from his black sleeve and pointed at the books they'd asked for. By ten o'clock I felt confident enough to leave him in charge of the department while I went to the employee lounge to telephone Margaret.

The line was engaged. I intended to ring her up again at a quarter past, but we had a surge of shoppers, and although Christmas Yet to Come was extremely helpful, I couldn't get away again till nearly eleven. When I dialed Margaret's flat, there was no answer.

I was almost glad. I wanted to know the time of the autographing before I spoke to her. We had already had two arguments over the "visitation schedule," as Margaret calls it. I was originally to have had Gemma Boxing Day as well as Christmas Eve, but Robert's parents had invited them up to Surrey for the entire week. We had compromised by my having Gemma Christmas Eve and part of Christmas Day. Then last

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week Margaret had rung up to say Robert's parents especially wanted them there for church on Christmas morning as it was a family tradition that Robert read the Scripture. "You can have her all Christmas Eve day," Margaret had said.

"I'm scheduled to work."

"You could insist on having the day off," she'd said, letting her voice die away.

It is a trick she has of leaving a sentence unfinished but her meaning perfectly clear. She used it to excellent account during the divorce, claiming she had not said any of the things I accused her of, as in fact she had not, and though I only see her now when she brings Gemma, I still understand what she doesn't say perfectly.

"You could insist on having the day off," she meant now, "if you really cared about Gemma." And there is no answer to that, no way to make her understand that Christmas Eve is not a day a shopclerk can insist on taking off, to explain to her that it is different from being an accountant. No way to explain why I gave up being an accountant.

And no way to explain to her that I might need to change the schedule because of an autographing. I decided to wait to try again till I had spoken to Mr. Voskins.

He did not come back till after noon. "The autographing will take place from eleven to one," he said, handing us a stack of red and green flyers. "Hand these out to the customers," he said.

I read the top flyer, relieved that the autographing wouldn't cause a problem with Gemma. "A Special Signing of Sir Spencer Siddon's latest book," it read. *"Making Money Hand Over Fist."*

"It's on the bestseller list," Mr. Voskins said happily. "We were very lucky to get him. His secretary will be here at half-past one to discuss the arrangements."

"We'll need more staff," I said. "The two of us can't possibly run an autographing and wait on customers at the same time."

"I'll try to hire someone," he said vaguely. "We'll discuss everything when Sir Spencer's secretary arrives."

"Shall I go to lunch now, then?" I said, "and let Mr. . . ." I pointed at the Spirit, "go second so I'll be back in time for the meeting?"

"No," he said. "I want you both here for the meeting. Go now." He waved vaguely in our direction.

"Which?"

"Both of you. I'll get someone from the housewares department to cover your department. Be back by one o'clock."

When our replacement came, I told the Spirit, "You can go to lunch," stuck *A Christmas Carol,* which I'd been reading on my lunch and tea

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breaks, in my coat pocket, and went to telephone Margaret. The line was engaged again.

When I came out of the lounge, the Spirit was standing there waiting for me, and I realized he wouldn't know where to go for lunch. Since Harridge's had closed its employee dining room to increase profits, employees had half an hour to get to, partake of, and return from lunch. "I know of a place that's quick," I told him.

He nodded, and I led off through the crowded aisles, hoping he would keep up. I need not have had any fear—he kept pace with me easily, in spite of not saying, as I did, "Sorry," to dozens of shoppers blocking the way. By the time we'd reached the south door, he was even with me, and, before I could turn toward Cavendish Square, he'd moved ahead, his arm extended and his long bony finger pointing toward Regent Street.

All the luncheon places in Regent Street are expensive and invariably crammed with shoppers resting their feet, and are a good ten minutes' walk away. We would have just enough time to walk there, not get waited on, and return emptyhanded.

"I usually go to Wilson's," I said, "it's closer," but he continued to point commandingly and we had no time for arguing either. I followed him down the street, down a lane I hadn't known was there, and into a dismal-looking lunch counter called Mama Montoni's.

It wasn't crowded, at any rate, and the small tables looked comparatively clean, though the made sandwiches on top of the counter looked several days old.

At one of the tables was an enormous man with a full brown beard, and I saw why the Spirit had brought me here. The man was dressed as the Spirit of Christmas Present, in a green robe edged with white fur, and a crown of holly.

"Come in! Come in!" he said, even though we were already in, and my companion glided over to him.

The enormous man shook his head and said, "No, he can't make it for lunch today," as if Christmas Yet to Come had spoken.

I wondered who the "he" they referred to was. The Spirit of Christmas Past, perhaps?

"Neither of us got a position, I'm afraid," the enormous man said to Yet to Come, sounding discouraged. "Most of the bank executives are on holiday. But the teller said the Adelphi is holding pantomime auditions this afternoon."

I wondered if the pantomine was *A Christmas Carol,* or if they had previously been in a production and were now trying to find employment that fit the costumes. It was a good costume. The holly crown had the requisite icicles, and the green robe was belted with a rusted scabbard, just as in the original. His chest was not bare, though, and neither were

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his feet. He had compromised with the weather by wearing sandals with thick socks and had fastened the open robe across his massive chest with a large green button.

I was still standing just inside the door. My companion turned and pointed at me, and the enormous man boomed out, "Come know me better, man," and beckoned me to the table.

I was going to say that I needed to order first, but the old woman behind the counter—Mama Montoni?—had disappeared into the back. I went over to the table. "How do you do?" I said. "I'm Edwin Grey."

"Delighted to meet you," the enormous man said heartily. "Sit down, sit down. My friend tells me you work together."

"Yes." I sat down. "At Harridge's."

"He tells me you are hiring additional staff in your department. Is that right?"

"Possibly," I said, wondering how Sir Spencer Siddon would feel at being confronted with half the characters from *A Christmas Carol*. Would he think he was meant to be Scrooge? "It would be only temporary, though. Just the three days till Christmas."

"Till Christmas," he said, and the old woman emerged from the back with a fistful of silverware and two plates of congealed-looking spaghetti.

"I'll have what they've having," I said, "and a paper cup of tea to take with me."

The old woman, who was clearly related to Yet to Come, didn't answer or even acknowledge that I'd spoken to her, but she disappeared into the back again.

"I didn't know this cafe was here," I said, so he wouldn't bring up the topic of job openings again.

"Excellent choice of books," he said, pointing at my *Christmas Carol,* which was protruding from my coat pocket.

"I should imagine it's your favorite," I said, laying it on the table, smiling.

He shook his shaggy brown head. "I prefer Mr. Dickens' *Little Dorrit,* so patient and cheerful in her imprisonment, and Trollope's *Barchester Towers*."

"Do you read a good deal?" I asked. It's rare to find anyone who reads the older authors, let alone Trollope.

He nodded. "I find it helps to pass the time," he said. "Especially at this time of year, 'When dark December glooms the day/ And takes our autumn joys away. When short and scant the sunbeam throws/ Upon the weary waste of snows/ A cold and profitless regard . . .' *Marmion*. Sir Walter Scott."

"Fourth canto," I said, and he beamed at me.

"You are a reader, too?" he said eagerly.

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"I find books a great comfort," I said, and he nodded.

"Tell me what you think of *A Christmas Carol,*" he said.

"I think it has lasted all these years because people want to believe it could happen," I said.

"But you don't believe it?" he said. "You don't believe a man might hear the truth and be changed by it?"

"I think Scrooge seems quite easily reformed," I said, "compared with the Scrooges I have known."

Mama Montoni emerged from the back again, glaring, and slapped down a plate of lukewarm spaghetti and a crockery cup half full of tea.

"So you have read *Marmion?*" the Spirit of Christmas Present said. "Tell me, what did you think of the tale of Sir David Lindesey?" and we launched into an eager discussion that lasted far too long. I would be late getting back for the meeting with Scrooge's secretary.

I stood up, and my assistant did, too. "We must be getting back," I said, pulling on my coat. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Mr . . . ?"

He extended his huge hand. "I am the Spirit of Christmas Present."

I laughed. "Then you're missing your third. Where's Christmas Past?"

"In America," he said quite seriously, "where he has been much corrupted by nostalgia and commercial interests."

He saw me looking skeptically at his socks and sandals. "You do not see us at our best," he said. "I fear we have fallen on hard times."

Apparently. I said, "I should think these would be good times, with any number of Scrooges you could reform."

"And so there are," he said, "but they are praised and rewarded for their greed, and much admired. And," he looked sternly at me, "they do not believe in spirits. They lay their visions to Freud and hormonal imbalance, and their therapists tell them they should feel no guilt, and advise them to focus further on themselves."

"Yes, well," I said, "I must be getting back." I pointed at my assistant, not knowing whether Present would expect me to address him as the Spirit of Christmas Yet to Come. "You can stay and talk to your friend if you wish," and made my escape, glad that at least I hadn't suggested he come speak to Mr. Voskins about being taken on, and wondering what Mr. Voskins would do when he found out he had hired a lunatic.

Mr. Voskins wasn't on the floor, and neither was the secretary. I looked at my watch, expecting it to be well past one, but it was only a quarter till. I rang up Margaret. The line was engaged.

My assistant was there when I got back, attending to a customer, but there was still no sign of Mr. Voskins. He finally came up at two to tell us the secretary had phoned to change the schedule.

"Of the autographing?" I said anxiously.

"No, of the meeting with us. His secretary won't be here till half-past."

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I took advantage of the delay to try Margaret again. And got Gemma.

"Mummy's downstairs talking to the doorman about our being gone," she told me.

"Do you know what she wanted to speak to me about?" I asked her.

"Nooo . . . ," she said, thinking, and added, with a child's irrelevance, "I went to the dentist. She'll be back up in a minute."

"I'll talk to you in the meantime, then," I said. "What shall we have to eat for Christmas Eve?"

"Figs," she said promptly.

"Figs?"

"Yes, and frosted cakes. Like the little princess and Ermengarde and Becky had at the feast. Well, actually, they didn't have it. Horrid Miss Minchin found out and took it all away from them. And red-currant wine. Only I suppose you won't let me have wine. But red-currant tea or red-currant juice. Red-currant *something*."

"And figs," I said distastefully.

"Yes, and a red shawl for a tablecloth. I want it *just* like in the book."

"What book?" I said, teasing.

"A Little Princess."

"Which one is that?"

"You *know*. The one where the little princess is rich and then she loses her father and Miss Minchin makes her live in the garret and be a servant and the Indian gentleman feels sorry for her and sends her things. You *know*. It's my favorite book."

I do know, of course. It has been her favorite for two years now, displacing both *Anne of Green Gables* and *Little Women* in her affections. "It's because we're just alike," she'd told me when I asked her why she liked it so much.

"You both live in a garret," I'd said.

"*No*. But we're both tall for our age, and we both have black hair."

"Of course," I said now. "I forgot. What do you want for Christmas?"

"Not a doll. I'm too old for dolls," she said promptly, and then hesitated. "The little princess's father always gave her books for Christmas."

"Did he?"

Mr. Voskins appeared at my elbow, looking agitated.

"I'll be right there," I said, cupping my hand over the mouthpiece.

"It's nearly half-past," he said.

"I'll be right there." I promised Gemma I'd purchase figs and red-currant *something,* and told her to tell her mother I'd phoned, and went to meet the secretary, wondering if he'd look like Bob Cratchit. That would make the cast complete, except for the Spirit of Christmas Past, of course, who was in America.

The secretary wasn't there yet. At a quarter to three, Mr. Voskins

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informed us that the secretary had phoned to change the meeting time to four. I used the extra time to purchase Gemma's present, a copy of *A Little Princess*. She owns a paperback, which she has read a dozen times, but this was a reproduction of the original, with a dark-blue cloth cover and coloured plates. Gemma looked at it longingly every time she came to see me, and had given all sorts of not-very veiled hints, like her, "The little princess's father bought her books," just now.

I had Yet to Come ring the book up for me, put it with my coat, and went back into the stockroom to get another copy so Gemma wouldn't see it was gone when she came to the store the day after tomorrow and guess.

When I came out with the copy, Mr. Voskins was there with Sir Spencer's secretary. I was wrong about the secretary's looking like Bob Cratchit. She was a smartly dressed young woman, with a short, sleek haircut, and a gold Rolex watch.

"Sir Spencer requires a straight-backed chair without arms, with a wood table seventy centimeters high, and two fountain pens with veridian ink. Where did you plan to have him sit?"

I showed her the table in the literature section. "Oh, this won't do at all," she said, looking at the books. "A photographer will be coming. These shelves will all have to be filled with copies of *Making Money Hand Over Fist*. Facing out. And the rest of them *here*," she said, pointing at the history shelves, "so that they're easily accessible from the queue. Who will be in charge of that?"

"He will," I said, pointing at Yet to Come.

"Single file," she said, looking at her notes. "Two books per person. New hardbacks only, no paperbacks and nothing previously owned."

"Do you want them to write the name they wish inscribed on a slip of paper?" I said, "so they won't have to spell their names for him?"

She stared at me coldly. "Sir Spencer does not personalize books, he signs them. Sir Spencer prefers Armentieres water, *not* Perrier, and some light refreshments—water biscuits and dietetic cheese." She checked off items in her notebook. "We'll need an exit through which he can depart without being seen."

"A trapdoor?" I said, looking at Yet to Come, who seemed positively friendly by comparison.

She turned to Mr. Voskins. "How many staff do you have?"

"I'm hiring additional help," he said, "and we're getting in additional books from the publisher."

She snapped the notebook shut. "Sir Spencer will be here from eleven to one. You were very lucky to get him. Sir Spencer is very much in demand."

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We spent the rest of the day bringing up books and scouring the basement and the furniture department for a table that would meet specifications. I had intended to shop for the ingredients for Gemma's feast after work, but instead I went from shop to shop looking for Armentieres water, which I found on the sixth try, and for red-currant juice, which I did not find. I bought a box of black-currant tea and hoped that would do.

It was nearly ten when I got home, but I phoned Margaret twice more. Both times, the line was engaged.

Next morning I left Yet to Come in charge of the department and went down to the food hall to arrange for the dietetic cheese and water biscuits. When I got back, Margaret was there, asking Yet to Come where I was.

"I suppose it was *your* idea to have a shopclerk that's mute," Margaret said.

"What are you doing here?" I said. "Is Gemma here, too?"

"Yes," Gemma said, coming up, smiling.

"I needed to speak to you," Margaret said. "Gemma, go over to the children's clothing department and see if you can find a hairbow to match your Christmas dress."

Gemma was looking at Yet to Come, who was pointing at the travel books section. "Is that the Spirit of Christmas Yet to Come?" she said. "From *A Christmas Carol?*"

"Yes," I said. "The genuine article."

"*Gemma,*" Margaret said. "Go find a hairbow. Burgundy, to match the dress Robert gave you." She sent her off, watching her till she was a good distance down the aisle, and then turned back to me. "It was obvious you weren't going to return my call."

"I did," I said. "Didn't Gemma tell you I'd phoned?"

"She *told* me you couldn't wait even a few moments till I returned, that you were too *busy*."

Gemma told her no such thing, of course. "What did you want to speak to me about?" I said.

"Your daughter's welfare." She looked pointedly at the boxes of books. "Or are you too busy for that, as well?"

There are times when it is hard for me to imagine that I ever loved Margaret. I know rationally that I did, that when she told me she wanted a divorce it was like a blade going through me, but I cannot call up the feeling, or remember what it was about her that I loved.

I said ploddingly, "What about her welfare?"

"She needs a brace. The dentist says she has an overbite and that it needs to be corrected. It will be expensive," she said and let her voice die away.

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Too expensive for a shopclerk, she means. An accountant could have afforded it.

There is no answer to that, even if she had actually said it. She believes I quit my job as an accountant out of spite, to keep her from collecting a large amount of child support, and there is nothing I could say that would convince her otherwise. Certainly not the truth, which is that having lost her, having lost Gemma, I could not bear to do without books as well.

"Robert has offered to pay for the brace," she said, "which I think is very generous of him, but he was afraid you might object. Do you?"

"No," I said, wishing I could say, "I want to pay for the brace," but, as she has not said, a shopclerk doesn't earn enough to pay for it. "I don't have any objections."

"I told him you wouldn't care," she said. "It's become increasingly clear over the past two years that you don't care about Gemma at all."

"And it's becoming increasingly clear," I said, raising my voice, "that you are systematically attempting to take my daughter away from me. You can't even bare to let me see her on Christmas!" I shouted, and saw Gemma.

She was over in the literature section, standing with her back to the shelves. She was holding the copy of *A Little Princess,* and she had obviously come back to see if it was still there, to see if I'd bought it yet.

And heard her parents trying to tear her in two. She huddled back against the shelves, looking small and hunted, clutching the book.

"Gemma," I said, and Margaret turned and saw her.

"Did you find a burgundy hairbow?" she said.

"No," Gemma said.

"Well, come along. We have shopping to do."

Gemma put the book back carefully, and started toward us.

"I'll see you tomorrow night," I said, trying to smile. "I found some black-currant tea for our feast."

She said solemnly, "Did you get the figs?"

"Come along, Gemma," Margaret said. "Tell your father goodbye."

"Goodbye," she said, and smiled tentatively at me.

"I'll get the figs," I promised.

Which was easier said than done. Harridge's food hall didn't have them, either tinned or fresh, and neither did the grocer's down the street. There wasn't time to walk to the market and back on my lunch break. I would have to go after work.

And I didn't want to go to Mama Montoni's. I didn't want Christmas Present making more inquiries about whether we were hiring additional staff. And I didn't feel like talking to anyone, sane or not. I ducked down the alley to Wilson's intending to get a bacon sandwich to take.

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The Spirit of Christmas Present was there, sitting at one of the tiny tables reading *Making Money Hand Over Fist.* He looked up when I came in and motioned me eagerly over to the table.

"I am supposed to meet Jacob Marley here," he said, waving me over. "Come, we'll discuss *Ivanhoe* and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood.*" He pulled a chair out for me. "I have always wondered if Edwin were truly dead, or if he could be brought to life again."

I sat down and picked up *Making Money Hand Over Fist.* "I thought you kept to the older authors."

"Research," he said, taking the book back. "Jacob has high hopes of a job for us. He went to the Old Bailey this morning to speak with a barrister."

"Who specializes in divorce, no doubt," I said. "Or did he go to speak to the barrister about getting his sentence reduced?"

"About repentance," he said.

I laughed humorlessly. "You really believe you're the incarnation of Dickens' spirits."

"Not Dickens'," he said.

"That you're really Christmas Present and my assistant is Christmas Yet to Come? Is that why he never speaks? Because the Spirit of Christmas Yet to Come in Dickens' story is mute?"

"He can speak," he said, quite seriously. "But he does not like to. Many find the sound of his voice distressing."

"And you believe your job is to reform misers and spread Christmas cheer?" I swung my arm wide. "Then why don't you do something?" I said bitterly. "Use your magic powers. Help the needy. House the homeless. Reunite fathers with their children."

"We have no such powers. A little skill with locks, some minor dexterity with time. We cannot change what is, or was. Our power is only to rebuke and to remind, to instruct and to forewarn."

"Like books," I said. "Which no one reads anymore."

"Your daughter."

"My daughter," I said, and brightened. "Do you know where I can find figs?"

"Tinned or fresh?"

"Either," I said.

"Fortnum and Mason's," he said, and as soon as I stood up, went back to reading Sir Spencer's book. There was not time to go to Fortnum's, though when I got back to Harridge's and looked at my watch, I had nearly ten minutes of my lunch break left.

Mr. Voskins was waiting for me.

"Sir Spencer's secretary phoned. Sir Spencer can't be here till half-past one." He handed me a stack of revised flyers. "The autographing will be from half-past one to half-past three."

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I looked at the flyers, dismayed.

"It was the only free time in his schedule," he said defensively. "We're lucky he can fit us in at all."

I thought of the cleaning up afterward. "I'll need to leave by four," I said. "My daughter's coming for Christmas Eve."

It was a long afternoon. Yet to Come took the books down from the literature shelves and put up Sir Spencer's books, facing out, bright green volumes with a pound note design and gold lettering. I taped up flyers and dealt with customers who had gotten a gift they had not expected and who now had, grudgingly, to return the favor, "And nothing over two pounds." I gave them credit card receipts and flyers, thinking, Only one more day till I have Gemma.

After work I went to Fortnum's, which had both fresh and tinned. I bought them both, and frosted cakes, and chocolates, which I intended to tell her the Indian gentleman had sent.

When I got home I rooted out an old red wool scarf to use as a tablecloth, and straightened up the flat. Only one more day.

Which day came at last, and with it a new flyer (half-past one to half-past three) and the Spirit of Christmas Present. "What are you doing here?" I said.

"We have found employment," he said, beaming.

"We?" I said, looking around for Marley. I didn't see anyone who looked the part, and Present was already piling copies of Sir Spencer's book on the display tables.

"What sort of employment?" I said suspiciously. "You're not planning some sort of demonstration against Sir Spencer, are you?"

"I'm your new assistant," he said, stacking books on the floor by the order desk. "I'm supposed to give out numbers for queueing up."

"I can't imagine that many people will come," I said, but by ten o'clock there were twenty people clutching their numbered chits.

I sold them copies of *Making Money Hand Over Fist* and explained why Sir Spencer wouldn't be there at eleven as advertised. "He's a very busy man," I said. "We're lucky he was able to fit us in at all."

Mr. Voskins came up at eleven to tell us we would have to forego lunch, which was patently obvious. The department was filled with milling people, Yet to Come had had to go down to the basement for more books, and Present was writing numbers on more chits.

By noon the queue had begun to form according to the numbers and was halfway down the aisle.

"You'd best go get more books," I told Yet to Come, and turned around to find Margaret standing there.

"What are you doing here?" I said blankly. "Where's Gemma?"

"She's up on fifth looking at dolls," she said.

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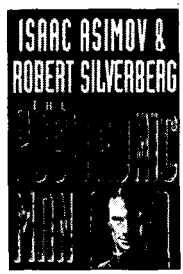

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"I thought she didn't want a doll."

"She said she just wanted to look at them," she said. Yes, I thought, and hide a safe two floors away from her parents' fighting.

"Christmas Eve won't work," Margaret said.

"What?" I said blankly, though I knew already what she meant, felt it like a blade going in.

"We need to take an earlier train. Robert's parents are having a friend of theirs down who's an orthodontist, and he's agreed to look at Gemma's overbite, but he's only going to be there for Christmas Eve."

"I'm to have Gemma Christmas Eve," I said stupidly.

"I *know*. That's why I came, so we can rework the schedule. We're coming back the day after New Year's. You can have her then."

"Why can't she see the orthodontist after New Year's?"

"He's a very busy man. Ordinarily Gemma would have to be put on a waiting list, but he's agreed to see her as a special favor. I think we should be very grateful he was able to fit us in at all."

"I'm scheduled to work inventory the day after New Year's," I said.

"Of course," she said, and let her voice die away. "The next weekend then. Whenever you like."

And the next weekend she will have to be fitted for the brace, I thought, and the following one it will have to be tightened or she will have to have bands put on. "I was counting on Gemma's being with me Christmas Eve. Can't you take a later train?" I said, though I already knew it was hopeless, knew I was shrinking against the bookcase the way Gemma had, looking hunted.

"The only trains are at five and half-past ten. The late one doesn't get in till one o'clock. You can hardly expect Robert to ask his parents and the orthodontist to wait up for us. I really do think you could be a bit more accommodating . . ."

"Mr. Grey, we're out of chits," Mr. Voskins said. "And I need to speak to you about the queue."

"We'll come back a day early, and you can have Gemma for New Year's," she said.

"It's nearly to the end of the aisle," Mr. Voskins said. "Should we loop it round?"

Margaret started toward the jammed aisle. "Wait," I said, "I have Gemma's present at home. Just a moment."

I hurried over to the literature shelves and then remembered those books had been moved over under Travel. I knelt and looked for the other copy of *A Little Princess*. It wasn't wrapped, but she would at least have it for Christmas.

It wasn't there. I looked through the B's twice, and then ran a finger along the backs, looking for the dark-blue cover. It wasn't there. I

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checked children's, thinking Yet to Come might have put it there, but it wasn't, and when I stood up from checking literature again, Margaret was gone.

"I've made it a double queue," Mr. Voskins said. "This is going to be a great success, isn't it? Mr. Grey?"

"A great success," I said and went to write more numbers on slips of paper.

Sir Spencer arrived at a quarter till two in a Saville Row suit. He settled himself in the straight-backed chair, looked disdainfully at the table and the queue and uncapped one of the fountain pens.

He began to sign the books that were placed before him, and to dispense wisdom to the admiring queue.

"Christmas is an excellent time to think about your future," he said, scrawling a squiggle that might have been an S followed by a long uneven line. "And an excellent time to plan your financial strategy for the new year."

Four persons back in the queue was someone who could only be meant to be Marley, in an old-fashioned coat and trousers draped with heavy chains and a good deal of gray-green greasepaint. He had a kerchief tied around his head and jaw and was clutching a copy of *Making Money Hand Over Fist.*

"They're actually going to try to reform him," I thought, and wondered what Sir Spencer would say.

Marley moved to the front of the queue and laid his open book down on the table. "In life . . . ," he said, and it was a curious voice, brittle, dry, a voice that sounded as if it had died away once and for all.

"In life I was Jacob Marley," he said, in that faint dead voice, and shook his chain with a gray-green hand, but Sir Spencer was already handing his book back to him and was reaching for the next.

"There are those who say that money isn't everything," Sir Spencer said to the crowd. "It isn't. Money is the *only* thing."

The queue applauded.

At half-past two, Sir Spencer stopped to flex the fingers of his writing hand and drink his Armentieres water. He consulted, whispering, with his secretary, looked at his watch, and took another sip.

I went over to the order desk to get another bottle, and when I came back I nearly collided with the Spirit of Christmas Present. He was carrying a huge plum pudding with a sprig of holly on top.

"What are you doing?" I said.

"Christmas is an excellent time to think about your future," he said, winking, and started toward the table, but the sleek secretary interposed herself between him and Sir Spencer.

He tried to give the plum pudding to her, still laughing, but she handed

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it back. "I specifically requested *light* refreshments," she said sharply, and went back over to Sir Spencer, looking at her watch.

Present followed her. "Come know me better," he said to her, but she was consulting with Sir Spencer again, and they were both looking at their watches.

She came over to me. "The queue needs to move along more quickly," she said. "Tell them to have their books open to the title page."

I did, working my way back along the queue. There was a sudden silence, and I looked back at the table. Yet to Come had glided in front of a middle-aged woman at the front of the queue, and she had stepped back, clutching her book to her wide bosom.

He's going to do it, I thought, and almost wished he could. It would be nice to see something good happen.

Sir Spencer reached his hand out for the book, and Yet to Come drew himself up and pointed his finger at him, and it was not a finger, but the bones of a skeleton.

I thought, he's going to speak, and knew what the voice would sound like. It was the voice of Margaret, telling me she wanted a divorce, telling me they had to take an earlier train. The voice of doom.

I drew in my breath, afraid to hear it, and the secretary leaned forward. "Sir Spencer does not sign body parts," she said sternly. "If you do not have a book, please step aside."

And that was that. Sir Spencer signed newly purchased hardbacks until a quarter of three and then stood up in mid-scrawl and went out the previously arranged back way.

"He didn't finish," the young girl whose book he had been in the midst of signing said plaintively, and I took the book and the pen and started after him, though without much hope.

I caught him at the door. "There are still people in the queue who haven't had their books signed," I said, holding out the book and pen, but the secretary had interposed herself between us.

"Sir Spencer will be signing on the second at Hatchard's," she said. "Tell them they can try again there."

"It's Christmas," I said, and took hold of his sleeve.

He looked pointedly at it.

"You'll miss your plane to Majorca," the secretary said, and he pulled his sleeve free and swept away, looking at his watch.

"Late," I heard the secretary say.

I was still holding the pen and the open book, with its half-finished S. I took it back to the girl. "If you'd like to leave it, I'll try to get it signed for you. Was it a Christmas present?"

"Yes, for my father," she said, "but I won't see him till after Christmas, so that's all right."

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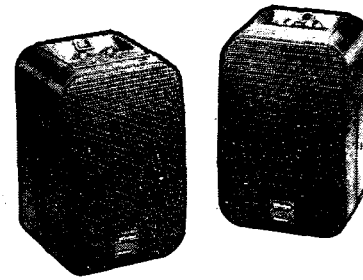

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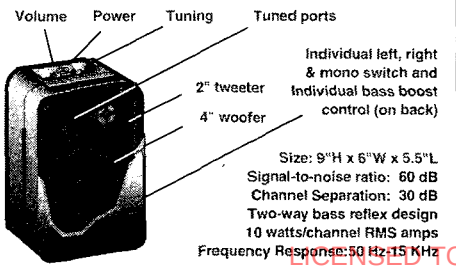

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I took her name and telephone number, set the books on the order desk, and began taking down the posters.

I had thought perhaps Yet to Come would have disappeared after his failure with Sir Spencer like the others had, but he was still there, putting books into boxes.

He seemed somehow more silent—which was impossible, he had never spoken a word—and downcast, which was ridiculous, as well. The Spirit of Christmas Yet to Come was supposed to be dreadful, terrifying, but he seemed to have shrunk into himself. Like Gemma, shrinking against the shelves.

It's Sir Spencer that's terrifying, I thought, and his secretary. And her gold Rolex watch. "Scrooges are praised and much rewarded for their greed," Present had said, and so they were, with Saville Row suits and knighthoods and Majorca. No wonder the Spirits had fallen on hard times.

"At least you tried," I said. "There are some battles that are lost before they're begun."

Children's came over to buy a gift. "For Housewares. I told her I didn't believe in exchanging with colleagues," she said irritably, "but she's bought me something anyway. And I'd planned on leaving early. I suppose you are, too, so you can spend the evening with your little girl."

I looked at my watch. It was after three. They would be leaving for the station soon, and Robert's parents, and the orthodontist.

I cleared away the refreshments. I put foil over the plum pudding and set it next to the girl's book, which I had no hope of getting signed, and went back to help Yet to Come take *Making Money Hand Over Fist* down from the shelves, trying not to think about Gemma and Christmas Eve.

The Spirit stopped suddenly and drew himself up and pointed, the robe falling away from his bony hand. I turned, afraid of more bad news, and there was Gemma in the aisle, working her way toward us.

She was pushing steadily upstream through shoppers who all seemed to be going in the opposite direction, ducking between shopping bags, with a determined expression on her narrow face.

"Gemma!" I said, and pulled her safely out of the aisle. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to tell you goodbye and that I'm sorry I can't come for Christmas Eve."

I raised my head and tried to see down the aisle. "Where's your mother? You didn't come here alone, did you?"

"Mummy's up on fifth," she said. "With the dolls. I told her I'd changed my mind about wanting one. A bride doll. With green eyes." She looked pleased with herself, as well she might. It was no small accomplishment to have gotten Margaret back here half an hour before they were to meet

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Robert at the station, and she would never have agreed if she'd known why Gemma wanted to come. I could imagine her arguments—there isn't time, you'll see him the day after New Year's, we can't inconvenience Robert, who after all is paying for your brace—and so could Gemma, apparently, and had sidestepped them neatly.

"Did you tell her you were coming down to third?" I said, trying to look disapproving.

"She told me to go look at games so I wouldn't see her buying the doll," she said. "I wanted to tell you I'd rather be with you Christmas Eve."

I love you, I thought.

"I think when I *do* come," she said seriously, "that we should pretend that it *is* Christmas Eve, like the little princess and Becky."

"They pretended it was Christmas Eve?"

"*No*. When the little princess was cold or hungry or sad she pretended her garret was the Bastille."

"The Bastille," I said thoughtfully. "I don't think they had figs in the Bastille."

"*No*." She laughed. "The little princess pretended all sorts of things. When she couldn't have what she wanted. So *I* think we should pretend it's Christmas Eve, and wear paper hats and light the tree and say things like, 'It's nearly Christmas,' and 'Oh, listen, the Christmas bells are chiming.' "

"And 'Pass the figs, please,' " I said.

"This is *serious*," she said. "We'll be together next Christmas, but till then we'll have to *pretend*." She paused, and looked solemn. "I'm going to have a good time in Surrey," she said, and her voice died away uncertainly.

"Of *course* you'll have a good time," I said heartily. "You'll get huge heaps of presents, and eat lots of goose. And figs. I hear in Surrey they use figs for stuffing." I hugged her to me.

A thin gray woman with rather the look of Miss Minchin came up. "Pardon me, do you work here?" she said disapprovingly.

"I'll be with you in just a moment," I said.

Yet to Come hurried up, but the woman waved him away. "I'm looking for a book," she said.

I said to Gemma, "You'd best get back before your mother finishes buying the doll and misses you."

"She won't. The bride dolls are all sold. I asked when I was here before." She smiled, her eyes crinkling. "She'll have to send them to check the stockroom," she said airily, looking just like her mother, and I remembered suddenly what I had loved about Margaret—her cleverness and

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the innocent pleasure she took in it, her resourcefulness. Her smile. And it was like being given a boon, a Christmas gift I hadn't known I wanted.

"I'm looking for a book," Miss Minchin repeated. "I saw it in here several weeks ago."

"I'd better go," Gemma said.

"Yes," I said, "and tell your mother you don't want the doll before she turns the stockroom inside out."

"I do want it, though," she said. "The little princess had a doll," and again that trailing away, as if she had left something unsaid.

"I thought you said all of them had been sold."

"They have," she said, "but there's one in the window display, and you know Mummy. She'll *make* them give it to her."

"*Pardon* me," Miss Minchin said insistently. "It was a green book, light green."

"I'd better go," Gemma said again.

"Yes," I said regretfully.

"Goodbye," she said, and plunged into the crush of shoppers, which now was going the other way.

"Hardback," Miss Minchin said. "It was *just* here on this shelf."

Gemma stopped halfway down the aisle, shoppers milling about her, and looked back at me. "You'd better eat the frosted cakes so they won't grow stale. I'm going to have a good time," she said, more firmly, and was swallowed by the crowd.

"It had gold lettering," Miss Minchin said. "It was by an earl, I think."

The book Miss Minchin wanted, after a protracted search, was Sir Spencer's *Making Money Hand Over Fist.* Of course.

"What a sweet little girl you have," she said as I rang up the sale, all friendliness now that she had gotten what she wanted. "You're very lucky."

"Yes," I said, though I did not feel lucky.

I looked at my watch. Five past four. She had already taken the train to Surrey, and I would not see her sweet face again this year, and even if I stayed after closing and put everything back as it had been, there were still five hours of Christmas Eve to be gotten through. And the day after. And all the days after.

And the rest of the afternoon, and all the shoppers who had left their shopping till too late, who were cross and tired and angry that we had no more copies of *The Outer Space Christmas Carol,* and who had *counted* on our giftwrapping their purchases.

And Mr. Voskins, who came up to say disapprovingly that he had been very disappointed in the sales from the autographing, and that he wanted the shelves back in order.

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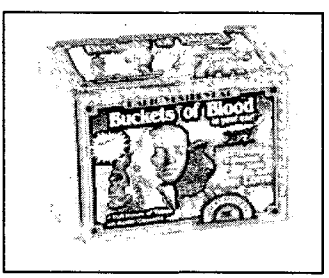

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In between, Yet to Come and I folded chairs and carried boxes of Sir S's books to the basement.

It grew dark outside, and the crush of shoppers subsided to a trickle. When Yet to Come came over to me with his bony hands full of a box of books, I said, "You needn't come back up again," and didn't even have the heart to wish him a happy Christmas.

The trickle of shoppers subsided to two desperate-looking young men. I sold them scented journals and started taking Sir S's books off the literature shelves and putting them in boxes.

On the second shelf from the top, wedged in behind *Making Money Hand Over Fist,* I found the other copy of *A Little Princess.*

And that seemed somehow the final blow. Not that it had been here all along—there was no real difference between its not being there and my not being able to find it, and Gemma would love it as much when I gave it to her next week as she would have Christmas morning—but that Sir Spencer Siddon, Sir Scrawl of the new hardbacks only and the Armentieres water, Sir Scrooge and his damnable secretary who had not even recognized the Spirits of Christmas, let alone heeded them, who had no desire to keep Christmas, had cost Gemma hers.

"Hard times," I said, and sank down in the wing chair. "I have fallen on hard times." After a while I opened the book and turned the pages, looking at the coloured plates. The little princess and her father in her carriage. The little princess and her father at the school. The little princess and her father.

The birthday party. The little princess huddled against a wall, her doll clutched to her, looking hunted.

"The little princess had a doll," she'd said, and meant, "To help her through hard times."

The way the little princess's doll had helped her when she lost her father. The way the book had helped Gemma.

"I find books a great comfort," I had told the Spirit of Christmas Present. And so had Gemma, who had lost her father.

"I'm going to have a good time in Surrey," she had said, her voice trailing off, and I could finish that sentence, too. "In spite of everything."

Not a hope, but a determination to try to be happy in spite of circumstances, as the little princess had tried to be happy in her chilly garret. "I'm going to have a good time," she'd said again, turning at the last minute, and it was rebuke and reminder and instruction, all at once. And comfort.

I stood a moment looking at the book, and then closed it and put it carefully back on the shelf, the way Gemma had.

I went over to the order desk and picked up the plum pudding. The

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book the girl had left for Sir Spencer to finish signing was under it. I opened it and took out the paper with her name and address on it.

Martha. I found the fountain pen with its veridian ink, uncapped it and drew a scrawl that looked a little like Sir Spencer's. "To Martha's father," I wrote above it. "Money isn't everything!" and went to find the Spirits.

If they could be found. If they had not, after all, found other employment with the barrister or the banker or taken a plane to Majorca, or gone up to Surrey.

Mama Montoni's had a large "closed" sign hanging inside the door, and the light above the counter was switched off, but when I tried the door it wasn't locked. I opened it, carefully, so the buzzer wouldn't sound, and leaned in. Mama Montoni must have switched off the heat as well. It was icy inside.

They were sitting at the table in the corner, hunched forward over it as if they were cold. Yet to Come had his hands up inside his sleeves, and Present kept tugging at his button as if to pull the green robe closer. He was reading to them, from *A Christmas Carol.*

" ' "You will be haunted, by three Spirits," ' " Present read. " ' "Is this the chance and hope you mentioned, Jacob?" Scrooge demanded of Marley in a faltering voice. "It is." "I—I think I'd rather not," said Scrooge. "Without their visits," said the Ghost, "you cannot hope to shun the path I tread." ' "

I banged the door open and strode in. " 'Come, dine with me, uncle,' " I said.

They all turned to look at me.

"We are past that place," Marley said. "Scrooge's nephew has already gone home, and so has Scrooge."

"We are at the place where Scrooge is being visited by Marley," Present said, pulling out a chair. "Will you join us?"

"No," I said. "You are at the place where you must visit me."

Mama Montoni came rushing out from the back. "I'm closed!" she growled. "It's Christmas Eve."

"It's Christmas Eve," I said, "and Mama Montoni's is closed, so you must dine with me."

They looked at each other. Mama Montoni snatched the closed sign from the door and brandished it in my face. "I'm *closed!*"

"I can't offer much. Figs. I have figs. And frosted cakes. And Sir Walter Scott. 'Twas Christmas broach'd the mightiest ale, 'Twas Christmas told the merriest tale.' "

" 'A Christmas gambol oft could cheer the poor man's heart through half the year,' " Present murmured, but none of them moved. Mama Montoni started for the phone, to dial 999, no doubt.

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"No one should be alone on Christmas Eve," I said.

They looked at each other again, and then Yet to Come stood up and glided over to me.

"The time grows short," I said, and Yet to Come extended his finger and pointed at them. Marley stood up, and then Present, closing his book gently.

Mama Montoni herded us out the door, looking daggers. I pulled *A Christmas Carol* out of my pocket and handed it to her. "Excellent book," I said. "Instructive."

She banged the door shut behind us and locked it. "Merry Christmas," I said to her through the door, and led the way home, though before we had reached the tube station, Yet to Come was ahead, his finger pointing the way to the train, and my street, and my flat.

"We've black currant tea," I said, going into the kitchen to put on the kettle. "And figs. Please, make yourselves at home. Present, the Dickens is in that bookcase, top shelf, and the Scott's just under it."

I set out sugar and milk and the frosted cakes I'd bought for Gemma. I took the foil off the plum pudding. "Courtesy of Sir Spencer Siddon, who unfortunately remains a miser," I said, setting it on the table. "I'm sorry you failed to find someone to reform."

"We have had some small success," Present said from the bookcase, and Marley smiled slyly.

"Who?" I said. "Not Mama Montoni?"

The kettle whistled. I poured the boiling water over the tea and brought the teapot in. "Come, come, sit down. Present, bring your book with you. You can read to us while the tea steeps." I pulled out a chair for him. "But first you must tell me about this person you reformed."

Marley and Yet to Come looked at each other, as if they shared a secret, and both of them looked at Christmas Present.

"You have read Scott's 'Marmion,' have you not?" he said, and I knew that, whoever it was, they weren't going to tell me. One of the people in the queue, perhaps? Or Harridge?

"I always think 'Marmion' an excellent poem for Christmas," Present said, and opened the book.

" 'And well our Christian sires of old,' " he read, " 'loved when the year its course had roll'd, and brought blithe Christmas back again, with all his hospitable train.' "

I poured out the tea.

" 'The wassel round, in good brown bowls,' " he read, " 'garnished with ribbons, blithely trowls.' " He put down the book and raised his teacup in a toast. "To Sir Walter Scott, who knew how to keep Christmas!"

"And to Mr. Dickens," Marley said, "the founder of the feast."

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"To books!" I said, thinking of Gemma and *A Little Princess,* "which instruct and sustain us through hard times."

" 'Heap on more wood!' " Present said, taking up his book again, " 'The wind is chill; but let it whistle as it will, we'll keep our Christmas merry still.' "

I poured out more tea, and we ate the frosted cakes and Gemma's figs and half a meat pie I found in the back of the refrigerator, and Present read us "Lockinvar," with sound effects.

As I was bringing in the second pot of tea, the clock began to strike, and outside church bells began to ring. I looked at the clock. It was, impossibly, midnight.

"Christmas already!" Present said jovially. "Here's to evenings with friends that fly too fast."

"And the friends who make it fly," I said.

"To small successes," Marley said, and raised his cup to me.

I looked at Christmas Present, and then at Yet to Come, whose face I still could not see, and then back at Marley. He smiled slyly.

"Come, come," Present said into the silence. "We have not had a toast from Christmas Yet to Come."

"Yes, yes," Marley said, clanking his chains excitedly. "Speak, Spirit."

Yet to Come took hold of his teacup handle with his bony fingers and raised his cup.

I held my breath.

"To Christmas," he said, and why had I ever feared that voice? It was clear and childlike. Like Gemma's voice, saying, "We'll be together next Christmas."

"To Christmas," the Spirit of Christmas Yet to Come said, his voice growing stronger with each word, "God bless us Every One." ●

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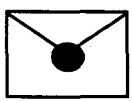

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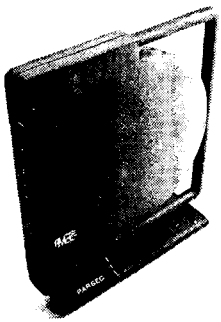

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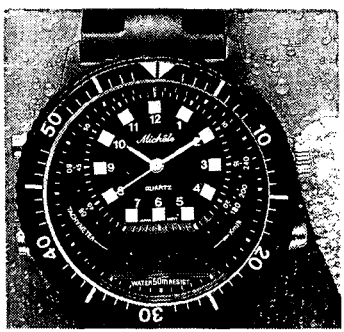

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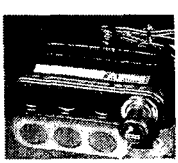

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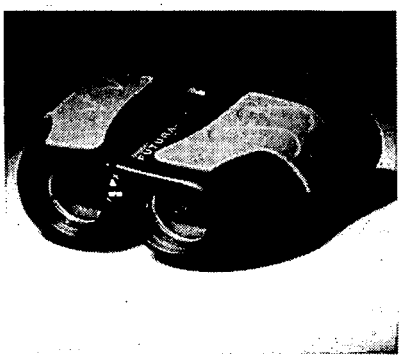

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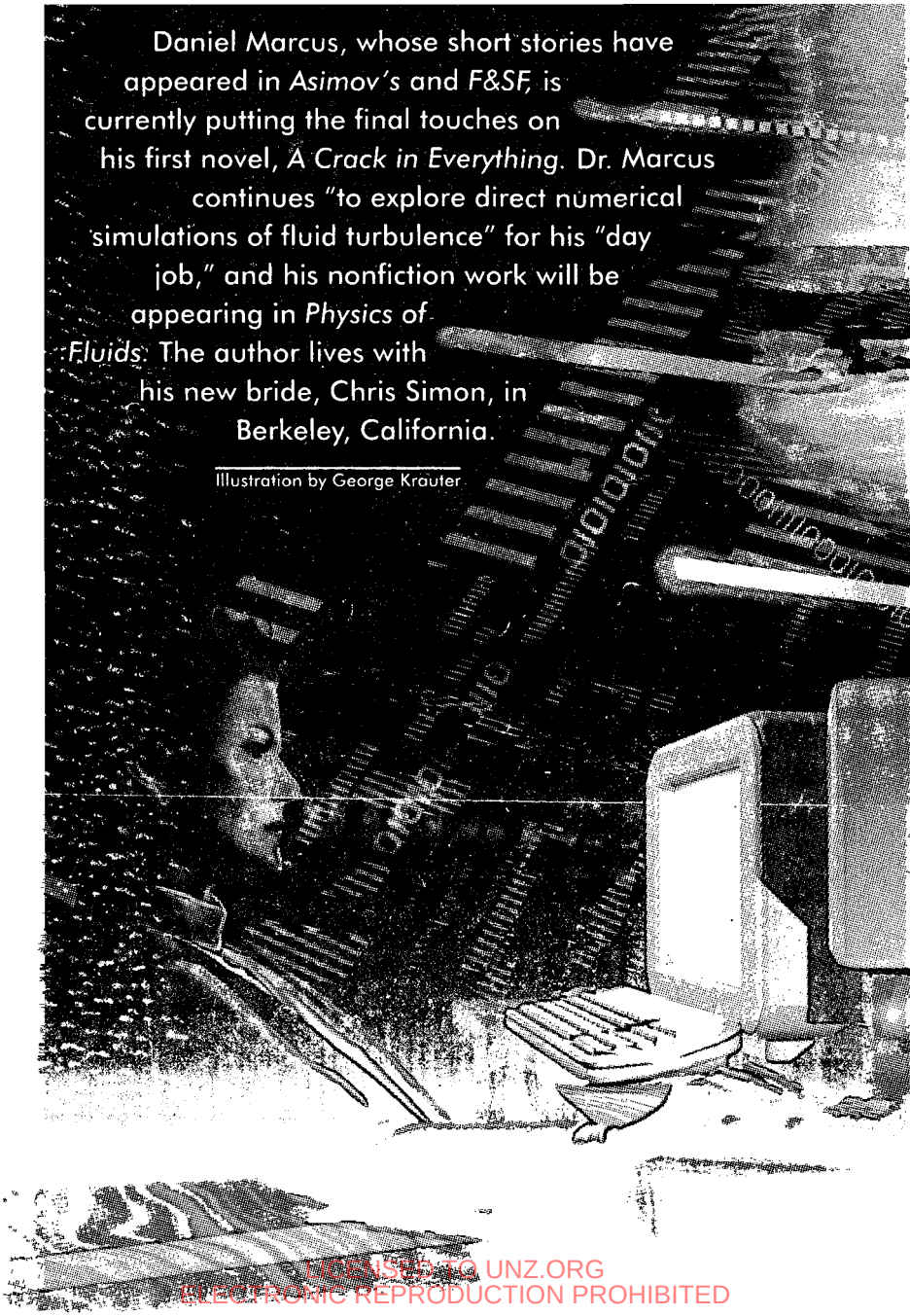
Daniel Marcus, whose short stories have appeared in *Asimov's* and *F&SF*, is currently putting the final touches on his first novel, *A Crack in Everything*. Dr. Marcus continues "to explore direct numerical simulations of fluid turbulence" for his "day job," and his nonfiction work will be appearing in *Physics of Fluids*. The author lives with his new bride, Chris Simon, in Berkeley, California.

Illustration by George Krauter



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Daniel Marcus

CONVERSATIONS WITH MICHAEL

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"I'm not ready," I said. I laced my fingers together and leaned forward in the soft chair, perching on the edge of the cushion. I looked up at Alice. The window behind her was polarized black as pitch and gave the unsettling impression of limitless depth, framing her face like one of those old velvet paintings you could buy down in Tijuana before the Burning.

"I think you are, Stacey," she said. "We've been working toward this for a long time. We've done everything we can in realspace. It's time for you to face him." She looked at me with an expectant, open expression, as if she was wondering what my response was going to be. I suspected that she knew, though. She always knew.

I looked down at my hand, leaned back in the chair, shifted my weight. The chair responded by subtly rearranging the cushions to support me. The silence hung between us. Our sessions were often like this—islands of brief dialogue separated by vast gulfs. Finally, I heaved a huge sigh. It felt like it was coming not just from my chest but from my whole body, like my soul was escaping. There was a tightness around the corners of my eyes and across my forehead. I looked up at her. I nodded.

The Virtual Session room—real wood paneling, indirect lighting, abstract art on three walls. A fourth wall dominated by an instrument panel of black glass and polished chrome. Two pieces of furniture, elaborate barcaloungers crowned with spiky helmets, sprouted neatly tied bundles of wires leading to the panel. Red and yellow telltales winked from beneath the glass like the eyes of jungle animals.

Alice led me to one of the chairs and strapped me in. "Remember, I'll be right here the whole time. I'll be *him*."

I nodded. I could feel beads of sweat forming on my upper lip and forehead. Alice attached sensors to my fingers, my neck. She produced a tissue from somewhere and gently wiped the sweat from my face.

"You'll be fine," she said, and began to connect herself to the other chair.

I was standing next to home plate in the Little League baseball field behind the ConEd cooling towers. A breeze coming in off the Long Island Sound brought with it a faint smell of salt and sewage. The sky was a soft, pale blue, a shade I hadn't seen in twenty years. I reached up and touched my face. *No u.v. block*. Brief surge of panic. I looked at the sky again and realized that I wouldn't need it.

My son was sitting in the whitewashed risers paralleling the third base line, looking at me. He raised his hand in greeting. I gave him an answering wave and walked toward him. My heart was pounding in my chest.

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He looked vibrant and full of life, like he did in the yellowed, age-curled pictures I kept in the shoebox on the top shelf of my bedroom closet. It clashed with my last memory of him—withered, emaciated body, skin stretched tight across skullbones framed by crisp hospital linen, sick, flickering light in his ancient child's eyes. I sat down next to him.

"Hi, Mike," I said.

"Hey, Mom."

It's crazy, but I couldn't think of a single thing to say to him. There was so much I wanted to tell him. (I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, baby). I wanted to take him in my arms and hold him to me and not let go. An inane thought came bubbling up to the surface of my mind—I wondered if he was hungry. It was a manageable thought, though, and I held on to it like a drowning swimmer clutching a life preserver.

"You hungry, champ?" I asked. My voiced only cracked a little.

He smiled up at me. "Yeah." I saw Keith in that quick, sure grin, and a surge of loss and anger passed through me like a hot, sudden wind, gone just as quickly.

A wicker basket suddenly appeared at my feet. The corners of a red-and-white checked cloth peeked out from under the edges of the lid.

"I've got some deviled ham," I said, knowing that it would be there. "And some Ho-Ho's for dessert."

"Great," he said, but it didn't sound right. I don't know why, but at that moment the illusion collapsed and I *knew* that it was just Alice there, Alice in a Michael suit, Alice strapped into a VS deck weaving a fiberoptic tapestry of ones and zeros with an insensate, cybernetic loom. To fool me into grace.

"This is bullshit," I said.

Michael frowned. "Mom . . . ?" The frown was very good, very Michael-like, but the illusion was already shot.

"Just get me out of here, Alice. It's not working."

He sighed, shoulders set with the exaggerated exasperation of a child. "Okay," he nodded.

I closed my eyes, and when I opened them again, I was back in the VS room. I unstrapped myself and started to get up. A rush of vertigo sat me down again.

"Hey," Alice said. "Easy." Her face hovered over me like a cloud.

I looked at her accusingly. "I knew it was you. This is just bullshit gameplaying."

She shook her head. "You did very well for a first virtual session. Of course, your history helps you a lot here, but some people can't even interact in V-space at all. *You* created the ball park; *you* gave *me* enough

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cues to help build a consensual reality." She smiled gently and touched me on the shoulder. "We made progress today."

The Dinkins Arcology is built on a lattice of pontoons that stretches out from Battery Park into the Upper New York Bay like a dendritic tongue, sending fractal limbs in all directions. That's its official name, but even before the first fullerene panel was snapped into place, it was Dinkytown. It was intended to be an egalitarian effort, public housing hand-in-hand with private enterprise, the disadvantaged and the well-to-do rolling up their sleeves together and creating a community—turn-of-the-century policyspeak made manifest. (Soft industrial music swells in the background. Dissolve to a schoolyard swarming with children in a tastefully balanced demographic mix.) But in fact, a stratification evolved dynamically, independent of intention. Pockets of public assistance clusters dotted the arcology ("like cancerous cells," the *Times* op-ed file whined), side by side with ghettos of affluence. I still have an income, and managed to buy our way into Avalon, on the Governor's Island side.

I wasn't ready to go home yet, so I took the long way, out along the "boardwalk"—a promenade with a polarized roof that runs around Dinkytown's circumference. Before long, the crowds thinned out, and I strolled slowly along the bay, enjoying the cool breeze coming in off the water. There was a trace of sewage smell and a hint of acrid chemicals, but it wasn't too bad. Some fool was windsurfing up near the mouth of the East River, begging for a dose of septic shock. They'd cleaned things up a lot since the twentieth, but it still wasn't exactly safe.

Some things you can't clean up, though, no matter how hard you try. Michael. I remember the day it happened. I was mainlining and somebody brought the system down cold. Sense impressions filtered in through the nausea—people rushing back and forth, voices shouting, several news feeds on at once. "Partial meltdown . . . Montauk nuke . . . another Chernobyl." Things blurred together. I made my way up to the roof heliport somehow and threatened a chopper pilot with my Swiss Army knife to take me to Montauk. It took three large men to hold me down.

It turned out to be just a "small" release, quickly contained. And it was late in the day, so the prevailing winds were blowing the radioactive plume out to sea, away from the thirty-odd million souls in the Greater New York Metropolitan Area. But it didn't spare Montauk. And it didn't spare Michael.

I could picture him standing there in the schoolyard, smiling, the wind ruffling his hair, as the gamma rays tunneled through his body, leaving an irreparable wake of damaged cells. The fatality rate in Montauk was 30 percent during the first year, 20 percent during the second, then it

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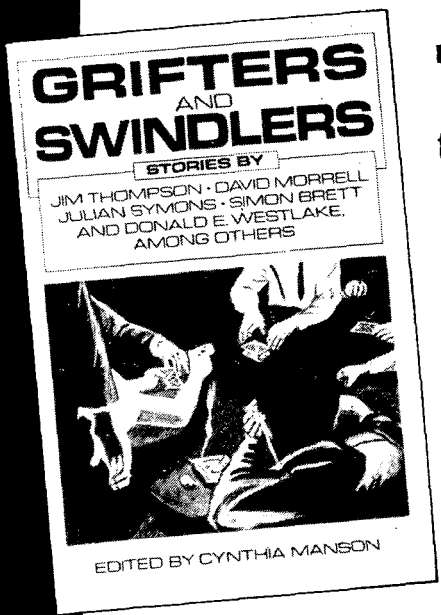
THE BEST OF THE LOWLIFE
GRIFTERS AND SWINDLERS

Edited by Cynthia Manson



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tailed off rapidly from there. Michael was still alive three years later; we thought he'd been spared. Then, all of a sudden, his immune system collapsed. He started losing weight like crazy. Great, purple bruises appeared all over his body, like mysterious objects floating up from the bottom of a murky pond. The leukemia ripped through him so quickly you could almost see him fading away in realtime. When it was over, there was hardly anything left to bury.

A pair of young men walked toward me along the promenade, holding hands. Their cheeks bore elaborate scars, a pattern I recognized as the chop of the Lords of Discipline.

"Don't stay out too long, Mama," the one on the left said. "UV count t'rough de roof today, mon." His boyfriend looked like he ought to know—a spiderweb tangle of ruptured blood vessels laced through the scars on his cheeks.

"Thanks," I nodded.

There were dirty dishes on the kitchen table, which meant that Keith had been up and about. I glanced down the hallway to where his door stood open a crack. He was probably back under. Just as well.

I sat down at my desk to check my e-mail. There were four ads and a message from Dmitry over at Cellular. I'd been doing some biotech database hacking for him, building a set of software tools for him to manage his technical library. It's not as boring as it sounds. Just because you can nanoscript a terabyte of data onto a slab of substrate the size of a mosquito wing doesn't mean you can retrieve it easily. In fact, with so much information available at your fingertips, encoding and navigating gets pretty hairy.

I flushed the ads and scrolled the message from Dmitry, a not particularly subtle inquiry as to just when I might have the bugs shaken out of the infosurfing macros I was looking up for him. I pounded out a quick reply—telling him that all good things come to those who wait, to cultivate the patient heart of a grandmother, and to get off my case or I'd accidentally mail his shiny, new virtual toys off to DevNull.

I enjoyed jerking his chain a little. I'd never met him in person, but we'd been working together online for a couple of years. His Proxy was a short, balding, somewhat chubby man who wore dark, rumpled suits with suspenders and frayed cuffs. The frayed cuffs were a brilliant touch—it was easy to forget you were looking at a sim. Of course, he probably looked nothing like that. Online relationships are almost all smoke and mirrors.

I got to work. I pulled down a couple of windows on the big monitor and dropped some shell scripts into the queue for the public databases.

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The private and corporate 'bases were a little trickier. I fired off an autonomous agent to deal with the protocol.

I quickly became submerged in the work. It was soothing, like immersing myself in the hot, swirling waters of a jacuzzi. It wasn't quite like mainlining, but it was close.

Mainlining, pure info-surfing: there's no other rush like it, chemical or virtual. And I had been good. The Net was a tangled, spidery sprawl of pulsing light, nodes of brightness for other surfers. Structs were patches of infrared and UV that I could sense by the quality of the pain they caused. My paradigm for navigation was the avoidance of discomfort.

After Michael, I started losing it. The only thing that keeps a surfer on that knife-edge of perception is discrimination—the ability to distinguish real from Memorex. Mine was shot. I'd be walking down the street, and the sparkles of light from the silica chips in the pavement would dissolve into the coruscating signature of the struct I'd navigated that morning. I'd be in the middle of a conversation and start framing my responses as instruction sets.

I fell apart for a while. When my medical leave ran out, I quit Sony. I still had connections, and managed to pull together an occasional consulting gig. Before I knew it, I had my hands full freelancing. I was surfing again, and it was good, but I never mainlined anymore. And Keith was always there to remind me why I shouldn't, just in case I forgot.

I don't know how long I worked, but slowly a sense of physical space began to seep back into my consciousness. It had gotten dark; my hands on the keypad were illuminated only by the glow of the monitor. Outside, the sky held the last blush of twilight. Reflected lights from Manhattan and Brooklyn made shimmering castles in the water at the mouth of the East River.

I logged off the satlink and sat there in the dark for a few minutes. It was time to look in on Keith. I took a deep breath, then another.

The room was dark except for the tiny, amber console lights. I could sense his shape, though, sprawled in the beanbag chair wedged into a corner. The soft, raspy whisper of his breathing filled the room. A stew of sour smells hung in the air—body odor, traces of urine, a strong whiff of feces.

I turned on the light. Keith didn't even flinch—the rig's induction field coupled right in to his optic nerve. Not much bandwidth, but what it lacked in information content it more than made up for in the sheer intensity of the pleasure it provided. I'd tried it once—I felt so lousy when I came out of it, I was scared to try it again.

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Not Keith. He'd been jacking off ever since the rigs went alpha. It was just a weekend thing at first, but after Michael died, he started going under more and more. Now he was down almost all the time. It was as if grief were a black hole, and he'd disappeared somewhere beyond its event horizon.

He was naked except for the incontinence pants bunched around his waist. Diapers, really. They gave him the bizarre appearance of a sallow, grey-haired baby. I could count his ribs. A streak of blood ran down his arm, and the IV rig lay on its side in the middle of the room. Probably ripped out the glucose drip and went looking for solid food after I left in the morning. He did that sometimes. I was always surprised when he got himself out from under long enough to get out to the kitchen and back.

I got a fresh pair of diapers from the closet, cleaned him up, and changed him. I set his IV up again and stood there for a while, looking at him. He still hadn't registered my presence. Every now and then, a muscle in his arm or thigh twitched. It reminded me of a dog I had when I was a child. She used to curl up in front of the fire to sleep, and every now and then, her hind legs would jump and scrabble at the carpet.

"Chasing rabbits in her dreams," my father would say, if he wasn't passed out yet. I wondered what kind of rabbits Keith was chasing.

I walked over to the console and turned it off. The glaze faded from his eyes and he clutched at himself.

"Wha—?" It came out like a croak.

I don't really know what I was thinking about. I guess I wanted to talk to him about Michael, but that was crazy.

I looked down at him. His eyes were burning flecks of pain. For a second, I saw Michael there, held in the hollow angles of his cheekbones. Then the impression was gone.

"You sick fuck," I said. I flicked the console back on and walked out of the room.

"Why do you stay with him?" Alice asked. The window behind her was in Aquarium mode—schools of brightly colored fish darted through shafts of sunlight over a carpet of waving, green kelp. It really irritated me.

"I hate your window," I said.

She reached under her desk and did something. The aquarium dissolved slowly to a neutral gray.

"Better?"

I nodded. "A little."

She sat there, smiling faintly. Waiting.

"So, why do I . . . ?"

She nodded.

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I took in a deep breath. I felt like I wasn't getting enough air. I let it out with a sigh.

"I . . . don't know. There's nobody home—he's a total wirehead. He's been like this ever since Michael died."

She nodded.

"He . . . needs me."

She nodded again, looking at me. Waiting.

I could feel myself tensing up, digging in my heels. I wasn't going to give her what she wanted.

Finally, she said, "What do *you* need, Stacey?"

I looked at her for a long time. Finally, I shook my head. "I don't know."

Jones Beach stretched out in front of us, a long pale ribbon, bordered on one side by the slate grey of the ocean and on the other by a checkerboard scatter of parking lots and ball fields that now served as sites for sprawling tent villages. Michael walked beside me, his head bent in concentration, absorbed with a piece of techno-trash he had picked up somewhere. A graceful curve of metal wound in a converging helix around a core of bundled fiberoptic cable. Wires trailed loosely from one end. It looked like a prop from a cheesy science fiction movie. Every now and then, he aimed it at an imaginary target and made ray-gun noises, *gzh-gzh-gzh,* his eyes narrowed with intense concentration.

The beach was filthier than I remembered. Ocean-tossed detritus of civilization lay everywhere—used hypodermic syringes, plastic bottles, the occasional limp, wrinkled condom. Coney Island whitefish, my father used to call them. I chuckled softly and looked over at Michael.

"What you doing, champ?" I asked.

Michael look up at me and smiled his quick, sure smile. "Changing stuff."

"Oh, yeah? What are you changing it into?"

"Making everything go away." He trained the ray gun on a dead seagull lying half-buried in the sand a few feet away. *Gzh-gzh-gzh.*

"Why do you want to do that?" I asked.

His face wrinkled in the disdain that children reserve for stupid adults. "It's *soft.*"

I smiled ruefully. "It sure is, champ."

Gzh-gzh-gzh. A tangle of seaweed and glittering strands of polyfoil was sent off to never-never land.

We walked together in silence for a while.

"If you could put anything you wanted here instead," I asked, finally, "what would it be?"

He thought for a moment. "In school, we were in a sim with dinosaurs.

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It was so *way*. There was this big one and it chased the little one and ate it. We were on a beach but there wasn't anything there." He looked up at me and smiled. "I'd put dinosaurs."

"Dinosaurs. Cool." I paused. "Do you know what happened to the dinosaurs?" I asked.

He nodded. "They died."

"How did they die, champ?"

His eyebrows drew together in a frown as he struggled to remember the words. "They couldn't, uh, adapt." He looked directly at me. "They couldn't adapt to cataclysm."

We stood there in the hot sun. I could see Alice looking at me through Michael's eyes without pretense now, calm and knowing. I was aware of myself standing on the cusp between reality and illusion, one foot in each. The coppery smell of decaying seaweed hung in the air, and the wind caressed my face in light, feathery touches.

Dmitry's "benevolent uncle" persona beamed at me from the vidscreen. "I have a proposition for you, Stacey," he said. There was a faint trace of Slavic accent in his voice.

I think of Proxies as fashion accessories, not all that much different from makeup or hairstyle—another layer of illusion we project to help us navigate the reefs and shoals of human interaction. Of course, there are the usual, endless Globalnet flamewars about the moral implications of being able to construct your own persona from scratch and modify it according to your own mood and who you're talking to. That's mostly the neo-Luddites, though, tooth and nail with the crackpot Libertarians—a lot of heat and smoke, not much light. My own feeling is that we all do that anyway to some extent, even in realspace.

"I'm listening, Dmitry." I was wearing what I thought of as my Conan the Librarian Proxy—a lean-limbed warrior goddess with blond, sun-streaked hair, a deerskin vest (a bit offensive to some, I know), and a quiver of arrows at my back. A button pinned to my vest read WILL HACK FOR FOOD. I had a monitor window open in the upper left corner of the vidscreen, and I could see the image that Dmitry was looking at. Rolling green hills dotted with grazing sheep spread out behind me. The sky was a deep, cloudless blue.

He cleared his throat. "You know that Cellular has recently purchased shares in the Velikovsky Orbital."

I nodded. Of course I did—I'd hacked a substantial portion of the background documentation on orbital biotech for their Stockholders' Report.

"We're putting together a small community up there to get a facility going—pharmaceuticals, protein construction, genetic mods. Not just biotech, though—we've got plans to start a substrate farm, grow high-T superconductors, micro-gee metallurgy, the works."

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I nodded again. No surprises there. Everything he'd mentioned required a zero-gravity environment for profitable manufacturing.

"Let's cut to the chase, Dmitry. I *wrote* that P.R. pitch."

He smiled and nodded, his head bobbing up and down. "Yes, yes, you did, didn't you? Very well." He cleared his throat again. "We need a—well, kind of a sysadmin up there, someone to coordinate all of the info-hacking facilities. Of course, we're hooked into Globalnet via microwave, but we also want to have an autonomous system for the Orbital itself. There'll be all the usual personal support stuff—you can delegate that—and we'll have a cluster of teraflop nodes for process simulation. Lots of bit-hacking there, and microwave links just don't have the bandwidth for that." He paused. "I floated your name up the food-chain here, and so far the echoes have all been pretty favorable. I'm sorry I didn't ask you beforehand, but I wanted to test the water first." He looked at me, his eyebrows raised, a slight smile playing on the corners of his mouth.

I didn't know what to say. I'd expected a lucrative project, enough consulting work to keep me solvent for a while, but nothing like this. My knee-jerk reaction was *No way*, but there was a small, still voice underneath that I couldn't quite smother. *Why not?* it asked.

I was silent for a long time.

"Stacey?" he said, finally.

"Look, Dmitry, I . . . " I saw my Proxy up there in a corner of the screen mouthing my words. It brushed a strand of windswept hair from its eyes. I reached up to the screen and tapped twice on the image—it rolled up like a window shade and disappeared. "Can we drop the Proxies, Dmitry? I need to really *see* you."

His eyebrows rose, then he nodded slowly. "Sure," he said, finally.

He reached offscreen and did something. His image collapsed and was replaced immediately with another. A plain, pleasant-looking man of young middle-age looked through the screen at me. He wore a conservative, corporate-style vest, and a pair of gold hoops dangled from his left earlobe. There was a streak of purple in his straight black hair. Behind him was a cluttered, windowless office, unremarkable except for a shelf of real books. He smiled questioningly at me.

I expected to be surprised by his appearance, but I wasn't—I already felt like I knew him. I stretched my hand to punch in the escape metacharacter on my own keypad, and when his eyebrows rose, I knew he was seeing the "real me" as well.

"Better?" he asked. The Slavic accent was gone, replaced with a flat, Midwestern drawl.

I nodded. "Yeah, much." We just sat there looking at each other for what felt like a long time, even though it was probably less than a

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minute. Finally, I sighed and shook my head. "I don't know what to say, Dmitry. I'm going to need some time to think."

"Sure," he nodded. "But don't take *too* long. You know how these things go—sooner or later, the posting winds up on Globalnet and we get flooded with applicants, most of them cranks. It gets a lot harder to separate the wheat from the chaff. The Powers That Be would rather see this nailed down through word-of-mouth."

"I'll let you know," I said.

"Good." He looked carefully at me. "Take care of yourself, Stacey."

"Bye," I said, but his image had already collapsed into a thin line and disappeared. I sat looking at the flat, blank space on the screen where the vidscreen window had been. I imagined I saw shapes rolling and shifting there, submerged in the depths of the phosphor.

Afternoon sunlight streamed through the Venetian blinds, throwing a pattern of stripes across the hospital bed. Michael sat propped up on a mass of pillows, looking very small surrounded by all that puffy whiteness. He was playing some sort of hand-held simulation game—crude holos a couple of inches high swarmed across the bed. They were barely visible in the bars of intense sunlight, coming alive with color when they scurried into the shadows. The high, tinny sound of their combat filled the room.

I stood at the door, watching him. His eyebrows were drawn down in concentration; the pink tip of his tongue protruded from the corner of his mouth. Tubes snaked from a patch on his arm to an array of soft, plastic bags hanging from a rack next to the bed.

"Hey, champ," I said.

He looked up and smiled. Dark circles framed his eyes, and the curve of his cheekbones seemed impossibly sharp.

"Hey, Mom. Just a sec . . . " His fingers danced on the little console for a few seconds longer. He leaned toward the panel. "Save," he said. The armies of tiny simulacra froze, then disappeared.

"I made it up to Level 7," he said, smiling.

"That's great, Mike." I walked over and sat down in the chair next to the bed. I reached out and brushed a strand of hair from his forehead.

"When you get better, we'll take you to one of those places where you can play with sim-holos as big as houses . . . "

He looked at me and frowned. "Come on, Mom, I'm not *gonna* get better. I'm gonna *die*." It was a simple declaration, not a complaint—as if he were explaining the facts of life to a slightly stupid friend.

It felt like he had physically struck me.

"I—why do you say that?" I stammered.

"I'm not *stupid*, Mom." He lifted his arm, showing the tubes trailing

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from the patch in his arm. He gestured around the room at the menagerie of stuffed animals resting on every available surface. "Med-net says that they'll be able to cure leukemia in ten years with nanocritters, but that we just aren't there yet." He shrugged. He looked and sounded for all the world like a wise old man. How did little kids learn so much?

I sighed. "I know you're not stupid, baby. It's just that . . . it's hard . . . " I didn't want to cry in front of him, to put him in the position of having to parent me. It wasn't supposed to work like that. But the tightness across my forehead got worse, and soon I could feel hot tears on my cheeks.

"I'm so sorry, baby . . . " I said.

He reached over and put his small hand on my shoulder.

"It's not *your* fault, Mom. *You* didn't do anything."

I *felt* responsible, though. We poisoned the world, killing off millions of our own children—*our own children*—so that we could have dishwashers and computers and microwave sat-links, and we were only beginning to step back from the brink. I didn't know if it was too late for us. But it was too late for Michael.

"It just *happened*, Mom." His voice jolted me out of my fog of self-pity. "Stuff just happens."

Alice sat behind her desk, waiting for me to say something. In the window behind her, the New York skyline glittered in the afternoon sun. There was a subtle quality about the colors and the distance resolution that told me it was real.

"I'll say this for you," I said, finally. "You're good. You're very good. It's uncanny how well you . . . simulate him. I almost feel like I could forgive myself . . . "

She smiled gently. "I want to show you something," she said. She punched something into the console at her desk and swiveled the monitor around so it was facing me.

VIRTUAL SESSION LOG

Name	*Status*	*On*	*Off*	*Date*
Donovan, Stacey	Solo	13:10	14:04	4/22/18

I looked up at her. "Solo?"

"Yeah. If we'd been doing another tandem session, my name would be on the log, too. You were all alone in there."

I felt something *give* inside me, like a door I'd been leaning on with all my strength was just beginning to budge. Alice nodded and smiled in the slightly smug and annoying way she has when she thinks she's

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made some sort of breakthrough with me. I didn't mind much, though. I even smiled back a little.

Keith was sitting in his beanbag chair in the corner, curled up like a loosely tied bundle of sticks. I walked over to the window and de-polarized it. Sunlight flooded the room. Keith looked impossibly pale in the light. Oozing sores stood out on his skin like bright, red stars. He'd pulled the glucose drop again, and a crust of dried blood peeked out from under the ragged bandage on his arm.

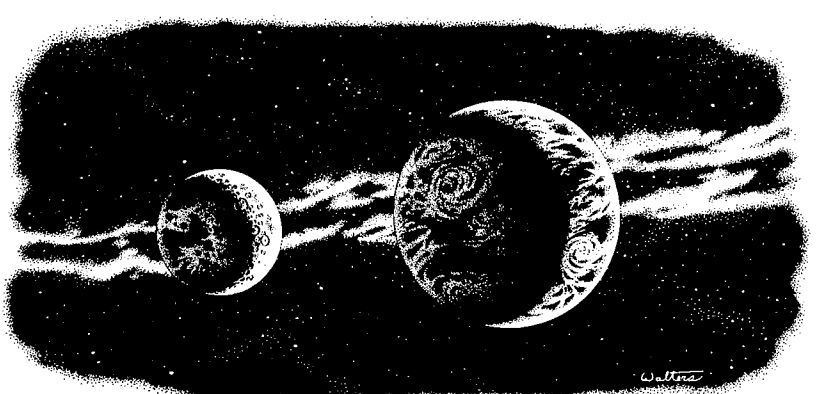
I turned off the console and waited. It took a few seconds, then he squeezed his eyes together and brought his arm up to shield them. Whimpering noises came from somewhere deep in his chest.

After a little while, the whimpering stopped, and he lowered his arm from his face. He looked at me accusingly. It was like playing a tape loop, those pain-filled eyes burning into me again. It was going to be different this time, though.

"I know you can understand me, Keith," I said. "I can't take care of you any more. I've arranged for you to go to a treatment program out on the Island. It's thirty days, and after that, you're on your own. I don't know if I'm going to be here or not when you get out, but you can't come live here again." I paused, not knowing what else to say. "I'm sorry," I said, finally. "It's got to be this way."

I couldn't read his expression. I looked for Michael there in his hurt eyes, in the angry set of his shoulders, but I couldn't see him, not a trace. He opened his mouth again, as if he wanted to say something, but all that came out was a raspy croak.

I stood there in the sunlight, waiting for him to find his voice. ●



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FLIGHT 063

Why always speak of Icarus' fall? —
That legendary plunge
Amid a shower of tallow
And feathers and the poor lad's
Sweat? And that little splash
Which caught the eye of Brueghel
While the sun remained
Aloof within its private zone?

That fall remains
Suspended in the corporate mind.
Yet as our Boeing flies
High above the Arctic Circle
Into the sun's eye, think —
Before the fall the flight was.
(So with Adam — just before
The Edenic Fall, he had
That first first taste of Eve.)

Dinner is served aboard Flight 063.
We eat from plastic trays, oblivious
To the stratosphere.

But Icarus — his cliff-top jump,
The leap of heart, the blue air scaled —
His glorious sense of life
Imperiled. Time
Fell far below, the everyday
Was lost in his ascent.

Up, up, he sailed, unheeding
Such silly limitations as
The melting point of wax

—Brian W. Aldiss

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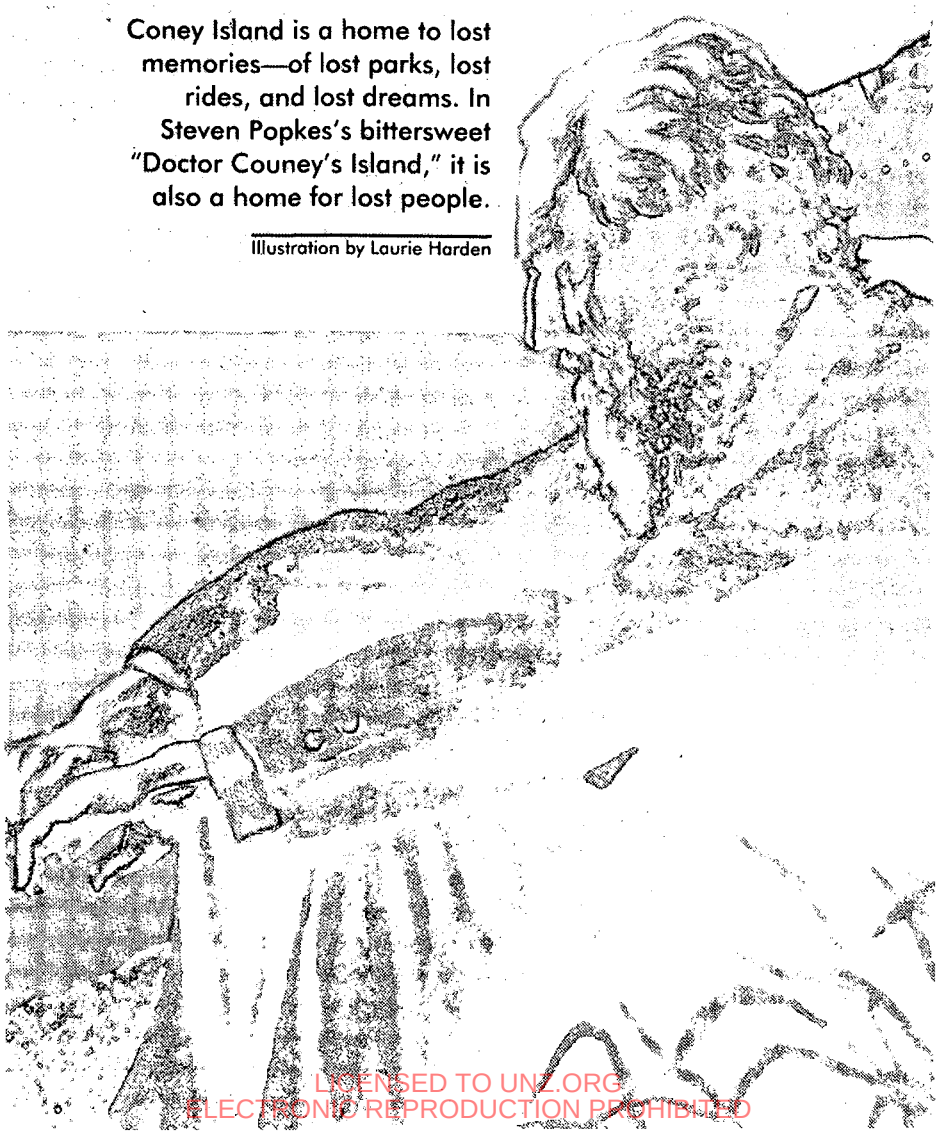
Steven Popkes

DOCTOR COUNEY'S ISLAND

Coney Island is a home to lost memories—of lost parks, lost rides, and lost dreams. In Steven Popkes's bittersweet "Doctor Couney's Island," it is also a home for lost people.

Illustration by Laurie Harden



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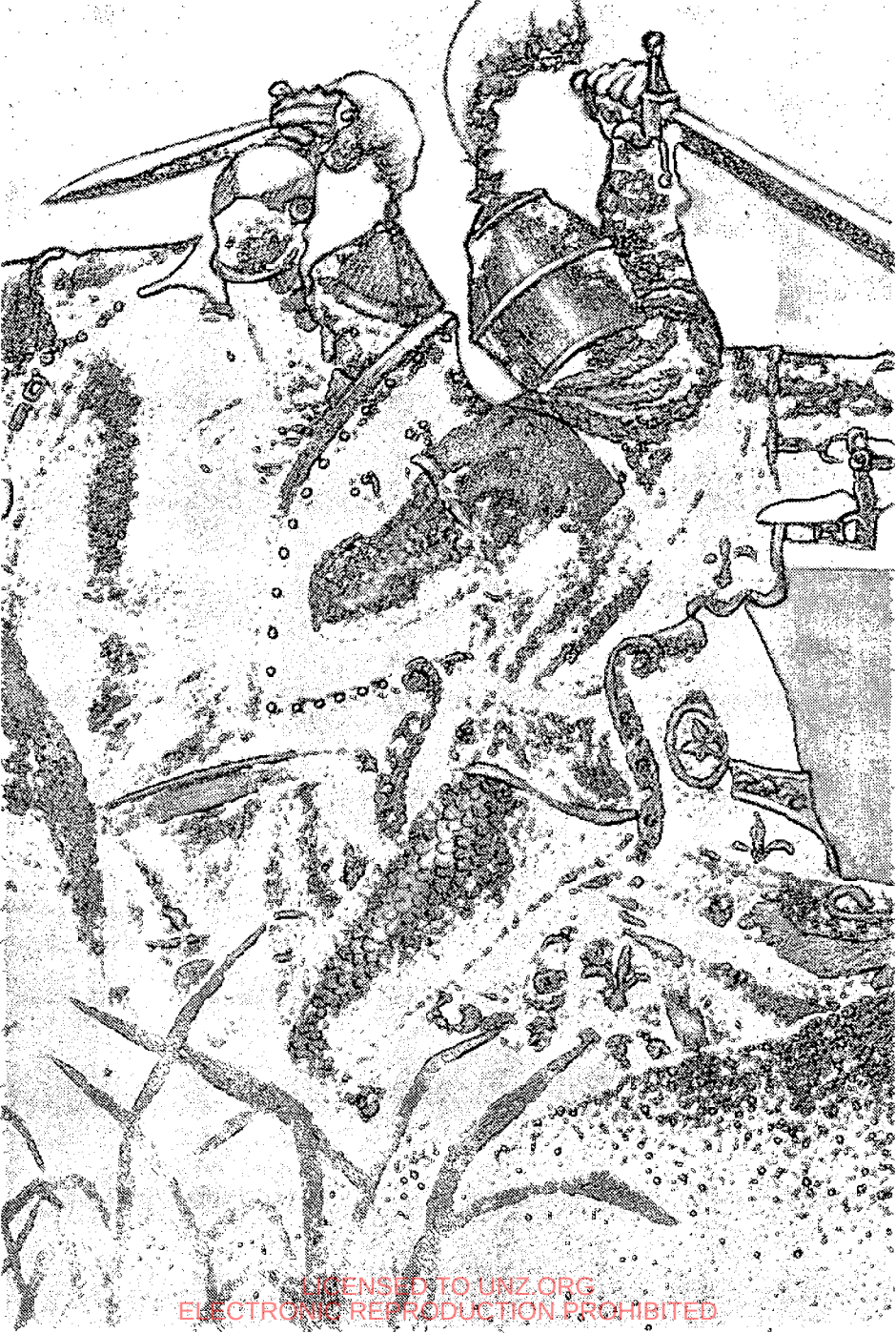

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It was damned cold that morning. You never thought Coney Island would ever be that cold. All you ever thought about the Island were the lights, bright like Fourth of July sparklers, and the smell of crowds and spilled beer, hot dogs and sauerkraut. And it was funny, he mused for a long minute, lying on his side on the frozen sand. Funny, you never remembered the smell of the ocean but here it is, as sudden and surprising as flashpowder: salt and the ripe stink of dirty water. What was the ocean more than that?

Merlin rolled himself up and leaned back against the clapboard wall of Dreamland—No it wasn't. Dreamland burned down years ago, burned down, oh the bright lights of that fire!, and was rebuilt by somebody new, died a financial death and was buried in the middle of Steeplechase. Where *was* he? He'd been nearly fifty when that happened. How old was he now?—and looked out over the water. His stomach hurt, a hard, unyielding knot. The flat land and calm sea looked as if they were drawn on paper. It was early morning just before the sun rose and the sun's breezes bit, as small and sharp as small dogs. Merlin huddled in his torn coat at their expectation.

(The beach on the Normandy coast was always cold. A hard wet sandy beach that matched him, hardness for hardness, when he stepped off the boat. A hardness in me at leaving. A hardness in me at being forced to leave. Arthur, I thought. You're on your own.)

He shook his head. He was trying to remember something. The beach. He was somewhere on the beach—near Nathan's down from the boardwalk. They came here last night—who?

Jimmy the Pinhead was lying next to where Merlin had been sleeping. Merlin slapped him on the rump. "Wake up," he said. Then coughed up a fluid mess, spit it on the sand and eyed it curiously. He shivered as the sun flared over the sea. Baths, he thought. I remember the baths—was that ten? Twenty years ago? Before John McKane died. Warm, they were. Hot. Steamy.

"Wake up, damn it." He kicked Jimmy viciously in the foot.

"Leave a sick man alone," Jimmy groaned and pushed him away.

"We stay here much longer and we won't be sick." Merlin leaned over him and shouted in his ear. "We'll be dead!"

Jimmy put both hands over his ears and sat up. "You're a filthy old man."

"You're right about that."

"You hurt my foot."

"Stop whining or I'll break your head." Merlin shivered again. "We got to get somewhere warm."

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"There any more liquor?"

Merlin stood and stretched, coughed again. "Yeah. French champagne. Come on."

He half led, half pushed Jimmy back up over the boardwalk and down the alley towards Asa's place. As the breeze rose Merlin felt even colder and there were moments of sharp panic when he couldn't seem to remember how to breathe—leaning against the closed storefronts.

Jimmy waited for him, patient as a drafthorse. Finally, Merlin brought them into the warm crook created by the space between Asa Morse's flower shop and Bond's Nickel Beer.

"This is warm, Merle," said Jimmy, sniffing the air. "Smells nice, too."

Merlin didn't answer. He huddled with his back against the brick wall of the flower shop, feeling the warmth of the coal furnace seep slowly into him. It loosened some glutinous substances deep in his chest and he was wracked with deep, painful coughs. Blackness edged his vision and everything he saw had showers of colors. Merlin had a sudden image of himself turned inside out. Then, the coughing passed and he felt the cold mentholated air filling his lungs.

(The air in Salem had been sweet, each breath like a labored symphony as I struggled to lift my chest one more time. Trapped with a mountain lying across me. I wanted to cry out I that was no witch. Cry out that I was, after all—just for a clean death. Either admission would destroy my children. Instead, I stayed silent, trying to breathe, wishing I could just die. I heard a voice ask me to confess—to what? Ravings? Had I breath and inclination I might have laughed. Had my body less strength I might have died right then. Neither happened. Only my breath, sucked in against too much weight and leaving too quickly.)

What was it he was trying to remember?

Someone took his arm, placed it across his shoulder and hoisted him to his feet.

"Stupid," Asa Moore said as he helped Merlin into his shop. "You were always stupid. Now no better than when you were a kid."

The sunlight seemed brighter in the greenhouse in the back of Asa's shop, reflected from rows of lilies and camellias, budding now but not yet bloomed. And it was steamy warm as when John McKane had taken Merlin and other ballot box enforcers to the baths on the night of the Coolidge election as a reward for faithfulness.

(Steamy, as when I'd sat with the Emperor and we'd been talking about what to do with the Senate. "They'd be useful as goats. Not otherwise," he'd said, and I had agreed.)

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* * *

Asa took Merlin's head in his hands and brought his face close.

"It's me, George. Asa Moore."

"I know you. I was just thinking."

Asa let him go. "Good. You get crazier every year."

Merlin shook his head. "I'm not crazy."

"Of course not." Asa spun around and grabbed Jimmy by the neck. "Damn you, don't touch the flowers!"

Jimmy snatched his hands back and held them under his arms. "I'm sorry. I was just trying to smell them."

"Go sit over there, next to the furnace."

Jimmy sat on the bench in the corner and in a few moments was asleep.

Asa snorted. "At least, he's easy."

Merlin nodded, sleepy himself. The smell of the budding camellias had a hypnotic effect on him. "Best pinhead act on the island."

Asa smiled sourly. "Such a great achievement." He rubbed his chest. "It's too much work carrying you in here. My heart isn't what it used to be. I have to work too hard as it is—two thousand carnations. Three hundred lilies. A hundred camellias. Them, I have to take care of. Otherwise, I don't make it through the year. You, I leave to freeze next time."

"Guinevere loved camellias. I did, too, for that matter."

"Shut up with that crap. You can stay here and keep warm but I don't have to listen to that King Arthur crap."

"He's Merlin," said Jimmy, suddenly awake. "He told me."

"Crap!" Asa stood up, short and furious. "His name is George Thomas and he grew up in Gravesend the same as I did, before it had hotels or amusement parks. We fought over the same girl. We worked for McKane together, keeping his tax collectors and prostitutes in line. George's been drinking himself dead since before you were born. I've seen it for forty years right into the middle of this goddamned depression. You think I don't know who he is *now?"*

Chastened, Jimmy huddled back down on the bench.

"And you," Asa said, turning to Merlin. "Don't tell me flowers. You know how I know you're crazy? 'Cause there were no camellias in King Arthur's time—not there. Camellias aren't native to England. A goddamned florist knows these things. They were brought to Europe. Long, long after your great king!"

(Short, like Keaton is short, standing on the field when the house fell down, so convinced of his own skills, of his planning, that when he stood there, serene as a saint, I had to look away. I've seen the last of him, I thought. He's dead, sure. And we all turned away—even his wife, a slight

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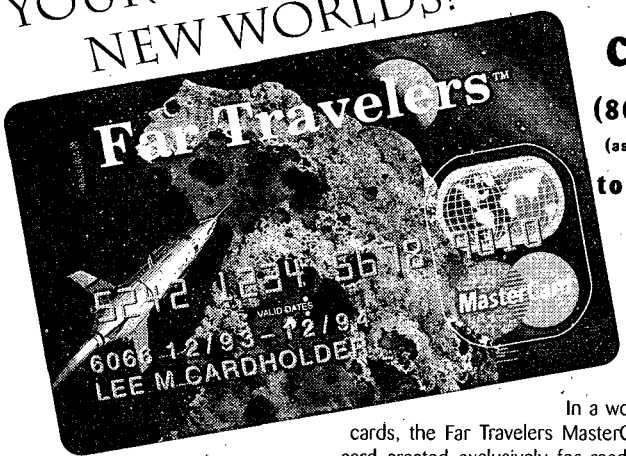

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and pretty thing—and heard the crash and turned back and he was standing, looking at us. And in that moment, we could all read his mind as sure as if he'd shouted at us: "Did you get it? Was the camera rolling?" And all we could think was, "How did you *do* that?")

That's not it. It was something else.

"Some other flower, then. Something like camellias. Asa, you don't understand." Merlin rubbed his face with his hands, suddenly aware of the smell of his clothes, the ancient sea smell of his skin. How much could Asa know? Merlin remembered listening to pronouncements and whimperings across the night wind when he was a child. Listening, rapt, to everyone still living, to those that had died. Was there any wonder he was confused? "It's like," he groped for words, feeling the leftover remains of alcohol like wool in his thoughts. "It's like we can all remember each other. Like remembering dreams."

"Crap!" shouted Asa, beating the air with his hands. "You started this crap when McKane went to jail and we had to hide out in Jersey. It was crap then and crap now."

"He's all the time, fulla' crap," came a thin voice behind Asa.

Asa turned around and let his arms fall, rubbed his chest with one hand and nodded. "Yeah. Hi, Joe."

Joe Littlefinger stepped down into the greenhouse, smoking a cigar as thick as his wrist. Joe's wrist, like the rest of him, was diminutive. He was slightly over three feet tall, but every inch of him was dressed impeccably: vest, jacket and pants, gold watch chain and derby. He knocked ash off the end of his cigar into one of the lily pots.

Asa reached down and gently plucked the cigar from his hands. "Later, when you go outside. I have enough problems without you killing my flowers." He reached through the door and placed the cigar outside.

Joe nodded, imperturbable. "Sure, Asa. I'm going up to Doctor Couney's place to look at the kids. Any of you guys want to go along?"

Merlin looked at him. "They're closed up. No tours until spring."

Joe shrugged. "I'm feeling generous today. One of the nurses will let us look at them for a half a buck each."

"I don't even have that."

"I'll spring for everybody." Joe waved his hand at them.

Asa had flowers to take care of and Jimmy had fallen asleep again. As Merlin followed Joe out the door, Asa grabbed his arm.

"Don't make me bring you in again, George," he said. "You come on in and sleep next to the furnace. You'll die if you stay out there."

"Thanks, Asa."

Asa looked deep into his face, grimaced. "You won't do it. I'll find you huddled next to the wall outside, dead, one day."

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Outside, the cold had sharpened but with the sun stronger now, it didn't feel quite so close. Joe retrieved his cigar carefully from the stoop and lit it, puffed it in glorious satisfaction.

"Life's worth living if y'got a good cigar, eh?" Joe tried to blow a smoke ring. The light breeze defeated him and he shrugged.

Doctor Martin Couney's Premature Baby Incubators had once been a featured attraction of Dreamland. But Dreamland was gone and the babies remained, now down the Bowery from Asa's shop. Joe and Merlin walked quickly to get out of the cold.

"Say, Merle," said Joe matter-of-factly as they walked. "Jimmy tells me there's something to this magic stuff of yours."

"There is no such thing as magic," said Merlin shortly. A sudden breeze down the street made him shiver. "I know."

"Not the way he tells it."

"Jimmy's a pinhead."

Joe nodded. "What's the truth, then?"

Merlin shrugged. "I don't know."

"Come on. Don't clam up on me."

"I don't know what it is. We remember each other. That's all. That's all I've ever said. Asa thinks I'm crazy." Merlin stopped in the middle of the road and stared down at Joe. "Do you think I'm crazy?"

Joe inspected the end of his cigar. "I think you were smart when you were with McKane and then you started drinking too much and talking too much. Now you're a bum."

Merlin laughed. "That's honest." He stood up straight and looked around him. The sky was a light turquoise and there were gulls flying overhead on sun-gilded wings. He held his arms wide. "I remember Arthur as a child—when the Romans left England, running off when the King fell. People dying—a thousand men in an hour. Can you imagine that? I ran. I remember the Romans, marching up big, wide roads—better roads than we got here, f'Christ's sake—into France. But we didn't call it France then. I don't remember what we called it. But I remember watching them. I remember marching with them. I remember marching with the Redcoats through Concord—I remember a lot of marching. I think I remember the Pharaohs—but it gets hazy that far back. Like remembering when you were three. I remember—"

"Right, Merle. Come on." Joe took the edge of his coat and started to pull him down the street. "Let's get out of the damned cold."

"I remember it all."

"Yeah." Joe spit on the ground. "Right. I should have known. Asa said you grew up together as kids. He says he should have known it then: you're crazy as they come." He strode ahead quickly, his feet striking the ground like small hammers.

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"I said I remember it."

"Just like I remember being that son-of-a-bitch Charlie Stratton, too," said Joe viciously. "And his bitch Lavinia. I'm thirty-eight inches. Four too many inches and fifty years too damned late. I could have made meat out of him. He was *so* genteel. I can sing. I can dance. I can play the fucking piano. You know hard that is with these fingers?" He held up his stubby hand.

Merlin stared at him, bewildered. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about show business, knucklehead." Joe slapped his arm. " 'Tom Thumb is my *stage name*,' he said. Like there was something else. I had my name changed. I don't give a cobbler's piss I was born John Quincy Armont. I'm Joseph Littlefinger *now*."

"What—"

Joe stopped in front of him and in a sudden unexpected display of strength grabbed his jacket and pulled Merlin to his knees. "I'm talking movies! Jimmy said one of these ghosts of yours makes fucking movies! In California!"

"Christ," moaned Merlin, and started laughing. He fell backwards into the street, sat down heavily. "You want an introduction."

"Yes, goddamn it. Stop laughing."

But Merlin was coughing and spitting and laughing on the ground.

"Stop laughing," Joe said again, took a long pull on his cigar and breathed out a great cloud of smoke. "It's a stupid idea."

Merlin gasped for breath and sat up. "Not really. It just doesn't work that way. I don't know any of these people. I just remember them—as if things happened to me. I don't even know their names."

"Right. You're a bum and a drunk and an ancient magician." Joe chuckled wryly. "But even a blind pig in shit will find an acorn sometime. And like the hedgehog said to the hairbrush, you can try anything once. Get up. Let's go see the babies."

Merlin felt obscurely stung to be so blithely cast aside. "Maybe I can figure out who he is. He works with Buster Keaton."

"Never mind."

"We're all related somehow—maybe we had the same ancestor somewhere."

"Adam No-navel, no doubt."

"Look, I didn't ask to have this happen to me," Merlin shouted at him. "Did I? I *liked* John McKane. I was happy working for him. This stuff eats away at you. It's not my fault."

Joe gently took his arms. " 'Suffer the fools,' they say. Come on, Merle. John McKane's been dead for thirty years. Coney's answer to Boss Tweed died before I was born. And Midget City was never what it was cracked up to be. It's been a whole new world for forty years."

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"You think I'm crazy."

"Who isn't? I come up to your waist. Makes me a little crazy, too."

Merlin still felt sore. "Then, how come you're always inviting me along?"

Joe grinned at him. "How tall am I?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"Exactly," said Joe. "Come on. Let's go see the babies."

(A baby is always small. The hand cradles the child's head easily. Perhaps God shaped men's hands for this purpose and this purpose alone, I thought, holding my son in my arms. All other possible uses for them are but happy accidents. Lie still, little one, I croon. Lie still and sleep. Perhaps some day you will be great carpenter.)

What was it he was trying to remember?

There were six incubators in the room, large white enamel and glass cabinets, each with its impossibly small infant contents. Here was a little girl, her hands the size of thumbnails. Next to her was a bluish boy, his chest no bigger around than a cup, struggling for breath. The breath goes in, the breath goes out.

The nurse smiled at Joe and looked dubiously at Merlin, but let them both in when Joe gave her an additional quarter. They walked past the different children until Joe stopped before one small, swollen-eyed child.

"You have to meet Billy," he whispered. "Billy Watterson, meet Merlin the Magician. Merle, meet Billy."

"Hello, Billy," whispered Merlin. Billy was no more than skin covering cords and veins. He was smaller than the others, no bigger than a Nathan frank. Merlin pressed his face against the glass so he could hear the boy's tiny breath. Straining, he heard the faintest rustle of leaves, the mere ghost of breathing.

"I like the tyke," said Joe softly. "He's less than two pounds—but Couney says you can't tell what he really weighed when he was born. They lose weight so fast, he said."

"Mister Billy Watterson, welcome to Coney Island."

They stood together in silence for a long time.

"You know," Joe said slowly. "This is his island."

"Billy?"

"No. This is Doctor Couney's island." Joe put his hand on the glass and leaned forward to see if the baby would respond. The baby seemed too intent on breathing to pay attention. "You and I are just so much air. McKane died. Tweed died. Dreamland died. Luna Park's dying. Steeplechase will die someday. And no one will remember them or us. But they'll remember Martin Couney and these little incubators. And the

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babies that live here and grow up, strong and tall. People will remember them and forget us."

Merlin shook his head. "No. It won't be like that. They'll remember the lights and the rides and the spectacles and the fat ladies and the strong men and the beaches and the crowds and Nathan's hot dogs and the freak shows. But Couney and his babies they'll forget."

"You're a drunken bum," Joe snarled at him softly. "What the hell do you know?"

Merlin grinned and tapped his skull. "Crazy, too. Merlin has second sight, doesn't he?"

The nurse came in suddenly. She pointed at Merlin. "You have to leave. Doctor Couney knows Joe, but he doesn't know you. He doesn't like to have his nursery cluttered with smelly, drunken bums. Now get out of here."

"Who's smelly?" chuckled Merlin.

"Go on," Joe pushed him. "I'll catch up to you later."

Outside, the air had warmed and it was almost noon. He wandered over behind Nathan's to rummage in the backalley cans for lunch. He was lucky. There was a half pound of moldy cheese and some buns only partly soggy. Sometimes he wondered if the cooks at Nathan's were leaving food out on purpose. He walked back up Twelfth Street and back under the boardwalk to eat. Merlin scraped the cheese against the corner of a brick piling and tossed the wet portion of the bread out to the gulls. In a small protected area, the sun shone on him and reflected from the walls and he was almost cozily warm. He savored the cheese and the bread and the resulting full stomach, and drowsily asked the air for a bottle of wine. The air was unmoved and he fell asleep.

Some long time later, he felt a rough hand shaking him rudely awake. Merlin sat up, blinked several times and rubbed the gum from his eyes. It was Joe, sitting on the sand. Wordlessly, Joe handed a bottle of cheap brandy over to him.

"What's the occasion?" asked Merlin. "Not that there needs to be one."

"We are drinking," said Joe ponderously, "to the late William Watterson."

It was a moment before Merlin knew who Joe was talking about. "Oh, no," he said when he understood.

Joe nodded. His clothes were dirty from walking under the boardwalk and there were deep gouges in the leather of his shoes. Joe did not seem to notice. "Mister Watterson, after a valiant effort at the very basics of living, quit this mortal coil about an hour ago. Doctor Couney tried to persuade the young man to stay but to no avail. Mister Watterson was adamant. This was no world for him."

All Merlin could think of was the tiny sound of the baby's breathing,

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imagining the faint, almost imperceptible cough, the deepening strain and then a deep sigh and silence. He rubbed his face with his hand, then tipped the bottle up and drank. "To young Billy."

"To young Billy. We hardly knew you," echoed Joe as he took back the bottle. "Christ, Merle. He was so little and he tried so *hard*. I never knew anything so small could work so hard just at breathing." Joe looked as if he was going to weep, as if, for a moment, he was a child himself. "The kid deserved a rattle, or a ball—or at least a tit, like a normal kid. Not a glass box and a little coffin. The best we can give him is a good drunk."

(As I lay on the bed, each breath was life bubbling to me through the fluid in my lungs. I was drowning—hadn't I heard once that drowning was an easy way to die? The man who wrote that was lost in an opium dream. "Gladly live, gladly die . . . " Did I write that? I never dreamed the last moments would be so hard. The body doesn't die easily. It dies hard—it fights for every breath, every heartbeat. Until, like coal burning, the ashes overwhelm it.)

That was almost it.

Merlin found tears on his own cheeks and wiped them away. He sniffed and that brought on another coughing attack, each building from within to an explosive climax, like nitroglycerin in his lungs, priming the next until there was no breath at all, just one long ragged wheeze.

Joe held him as he fought for breath. "Don't die on me now, Merle," Joe moaned. "I just couldn't take it. I swear, I just couldn't take it."

The cold air finally filled his lungs and he breathed carefully, as a thirsty man is careful with water. When he could, Merlin sat up and drank some of the brandy, feeling the warmth in his throat soothe his lungs, put a fire in his belly and a rubbery strength in his arms and legs.

"I left Jimmy over at Asa's shop. I got to go over and check on him. Asa's always scared he'll break something." Merlin stood up and dizzily leaned against the piling.

"Yeah." Joe drained the bottle and threw it viciously against the piling. The glass exploded and Joe stared at the wet spot. "Poor little son-of-a-bitch. I'm going to go home and get so drunk I can't sit in a chair." He looked up to Merlin. "You come on by if you don't want to sleep under the boardwalk. You always were good drinking company. Good company all around."

Merlin looked down at the sudden compliment. "Yeah. We'll see. I don't know where I'll end up."

"You think about it. It gets damned cold out here." Joe straightened

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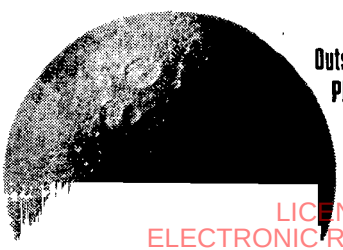

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his suit, pulled a cigar out of his pocket and lit it. The fetid smell almost made Merlin throw up.

Joe tipped his hat to Merlin and started walking down the beach towards Steeplechase. Merlin watched him for a moment, then ducked back under the boardwalk to Twelfth Street towards Asa's shop.

(It was a measure of my stature as a physician that I would be called to treat someone such as Harry Houdini. The escape artist had proven difficult to treat not because of the injury—which was, in fact, terminal—but because of Houdini's personality, which I found abrasive and made worse by his great pain. Still, it was hard not to feel pity as the man was pulled inexorably towards death. Houdini's pact with his wife, to come back after death, struck me as pitiful.

"There is no magic," Houdini whispered when we were alone. He looked about the room as if his wife would hear him.

"I know," I said, remembering everyone who remembered me. "More than you do.")

I know I'm looking for something. I know that. Desperately, completely. I want to know what it is.

He met Jimmy on the Bowery next to where the corner of Dreamland used to be.

"Hi, Merle," Jimmy said affably. He jerked his head towards Asa's flower shop. "He didn't look too good, so I thought I'd go home."

Merlin stared for a moment towards the shop, then searched Jimmy's slack face. "How'd he look?"

"Real tired, Merle." Jimmy shrugged. "I thought Gunther'd give me some wine if I came back on my own. He was real pissed the last time he found me under the boardwalk with you."

"Okay. You go on." He pushed Jimmy up the street. "I was just coming to get you."

"You have any wine?" asked Jimmy wistfully.

"Not a drop. But Joe does."

Jimmy nodded. "I'll go see him."

With that, he turned and walked steadily up the street, placing his feet with careful exactness. Merlin, watching him, was reminded of the time he and Jimmy had gotten drunk and the pinhead had fallen and broken his knee. Jimmy must have decided to be more careful from that, or had it pointed out to him. It wasn't clear if Jimmy was smart enough to figure it out for himself.

Asa had fallen asleep in his chair in the shop. His broad face lay on his chest like a deflated child's ball and snored faintly through his nose. His face was gray and chalky and he looked shrunken in his sleep, as if

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pulling away from a deep and abiding pain. Asa's heart had been troubling him for over ten years and Merlin knelt next to him and peered closely, trying to see if Asa's heart had begun to fail at last.

(Arthur had already heard the songs being sung about him as he lay on the bed. The King looked bad. His face was white and the continual, constant pain had given his voice a whimpering quaver that I hated. He hated it more than I, especially the craven sound that lurked in it when he asked for drugs.

"I never wanted to die," he said through clenched teeth. "Always, I feared it."

"No man is different," I said and leaned close to him, cradled his head against my breast. Once he had taken pleasure in that touch but now it was mere consolation.

"You cannot cure me, eh? Not even of the pain?" He tried to chuckle but it sounded bitter. "You are not much of a witch."

"No, my love," I said, looking down into his eyes. "I never was."

"Give me another damned potion then."

I held his head as he sipped it.

"It is spring," he said after a moment, as if that were some great surprise. "Can you smell the camellias?"

He did not speak again and soon after we laid him amidst the flowers he loved.)

"Maybe they weren't camellias," Merlin muttered under his breath. "Just because I remember them there doesn't mean they weren't there, does it?" Or did it? He remembered the smell strongly, as strongly as he could smell it here, now, in the greenhouse. A mistake in memory, maybe? Did that turn the whole tapestry of mind into rotting cloth?

The flower smell in the greenhouse was overpowering. Asa did not rouse as Merlin watched him. For the space of a hundred breaths, Merlin remembered his own life, not the others. Remembered he and Asa growing up in Gravesend, growing corn and squash, watching as the first hotels were built down on the beach, watching Norton build his bar and gambling den and begin the building of Coney Island. He remembered the whores on Sheepshead Bay and the night John Y. McKane tried to keep his empire against the entire state of New York by protecting the ballot boxes with a mob of Irish thugs. Merlin had been there, had wielded a club against the state-appointed voting supervisors. So had Asa. And hiding up in Harlem for two months waiting to get caught as McKane's trial dragged on and on. Impatient, running from New York into New Jersey, waiting again, following the trial, following the hearsay up and down the coast, trying to find out if it was safe to go home. He

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remembered working with Asa bucking hay on a horse farm, telling him one day in a moment of weakness about the voices and flinching away at the confusion in Asa's voice. Then, later, when they were both drunk, trying to explain. He'd been trying ever since.

His memories since McKane were faded like old cotton, the past bright as flowers. Even so, Asa was always there. Asa and his carnations, caught up in the idea down in Jersey and coming home to make it happen. Marrying, birthing, dying, all those things mixed together in Asa's life and Merlin watched it from under the boardwalk, like some ancient bridge-confined troll, watching people glitter through the planks, the light of the world reduced to slits. Asa slept. His breathing was labored. Stealthily, Merlin unbuttoned Asa's shirt and rested his hand on the bare skin. A warm smell compounded of earth and sweat escaped from the cloth.

Now, he prayed. If there is no magic, there can be no harm done in this. But if there is—and my life says there might be—heal this heart. Take my own heart for his. I never thought there was a God as the priests told me. Prove me wrong this once.

Out beyond him, residing in the ether like small eddies in a great river, he felt them there, dead and living. He listened to them for a sign, a hint of what to do. All he heard was the sound of the sea. It was as if he were standing in the water with high tide rushing past him, eyes closed, hands in the ocean, overwhelmed, and when the tide had turned, he looked down in his hands to see what had been left him.

(At last, I felt something give inside of me. The breath went out, the last of the good Salem air, and did not come back. And for a long, suspended moment, as I waited for it to return, knowing it would not, I realized that which had given way was life, and with the life the pain. There was no pain in dying. There was only the pain of holding onto life. I must remember this, I thought in sudden fever. I must remember.)

I remembered now.

Merlin pulled his hand away from Asa's chest and carefully and gently replaced the cloth. He sat back and watched him for a long time.

Asa roused and blearily looked around the room. His gaze fell on Merlin. "Hey there." He straightened up. "I wasn't feeling too good so I sat down. I didn't mean to take a nap. What time is it?"

Merlin shrugged. "I don't know. It's late. It'll be dark soon. How do you feel now?"

Asa stretched experimentally. "Better, I think. I don't feel any pain, anyway. For me that's good news. But then, it comes and goes. You don't look so good."

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Merlin shrugged again. "There's nothing new in that." He stood up and swayed a moment, felt his heart stab with a sudden pain.

"Are you okay?" Asa stood up and steadied him.

Merlin nodded. Smiled. "Yeah. I'm fine. I think I'll go down to the beach. I like the water."

Asa scowled. "You'll end up getting drunk down there and freezing to death. If it doesn't happen tonight, it'll happen later. Come on back here. Where it's warm."

Merlin shook his head.

"Christ! All those famous people you say you remember. Isn't there one ordinary person that has some sense?"

He chuckled, suddenly weary. "I'm a bum at Coney Island, Asa. What do you want me to do? What the hell else have I got?"

Asa softened. "Come on back. It's cold out there."

He looked at Asa, watched the small face as wrinkled as an old apple. "Maybe you're right, Asa."

Asa took him by the arms. "You aren't a young man, George. Come back here and stay warm."

George. He tasted the word. It had been a long time since he had thought of himself with that name. "Maybe I will. But I still want to go down to the beach for a while."

"You wouldn't disappoint an old man, would you?"

"Not if I can help it."

The wind died as the sun faded behind Steeplechase. The longest shadow was that of the parachute drop, two hundred feet tall, a long, skeletal umbrella. Dark now against the light. Lit again, Merlin knew, in only a few months.

He stood in the middle of the beach and watched the boardwalk turn charcoal black until there were only the silhouettes of things: the roller coaster, the shuttered freak shows, the Ferris wheel. Behind them, he could see at that moment, the lost towers, minarets and battlements of Luna Park and Dreamland, and behind them, again, the lost palaces and castles of Africa and Araby. Behind them, at last, he could see the memories of his own life, all of them, and adding to them now his own.

Pain shot through him, lancing his life like a scalpel across a boil. He coughed so long and hard that there was thunder in his ears and he forgot how to breathe.

There is no pain in dying, he remembered, proud that this salient fact had stayed with him. And he held this thought as the dark came toward him.

That night, across the cold ether of the world, there were the faint and intermittent sounds of mourning and remembered death. And, if one were quick, the smell of camellias. ●

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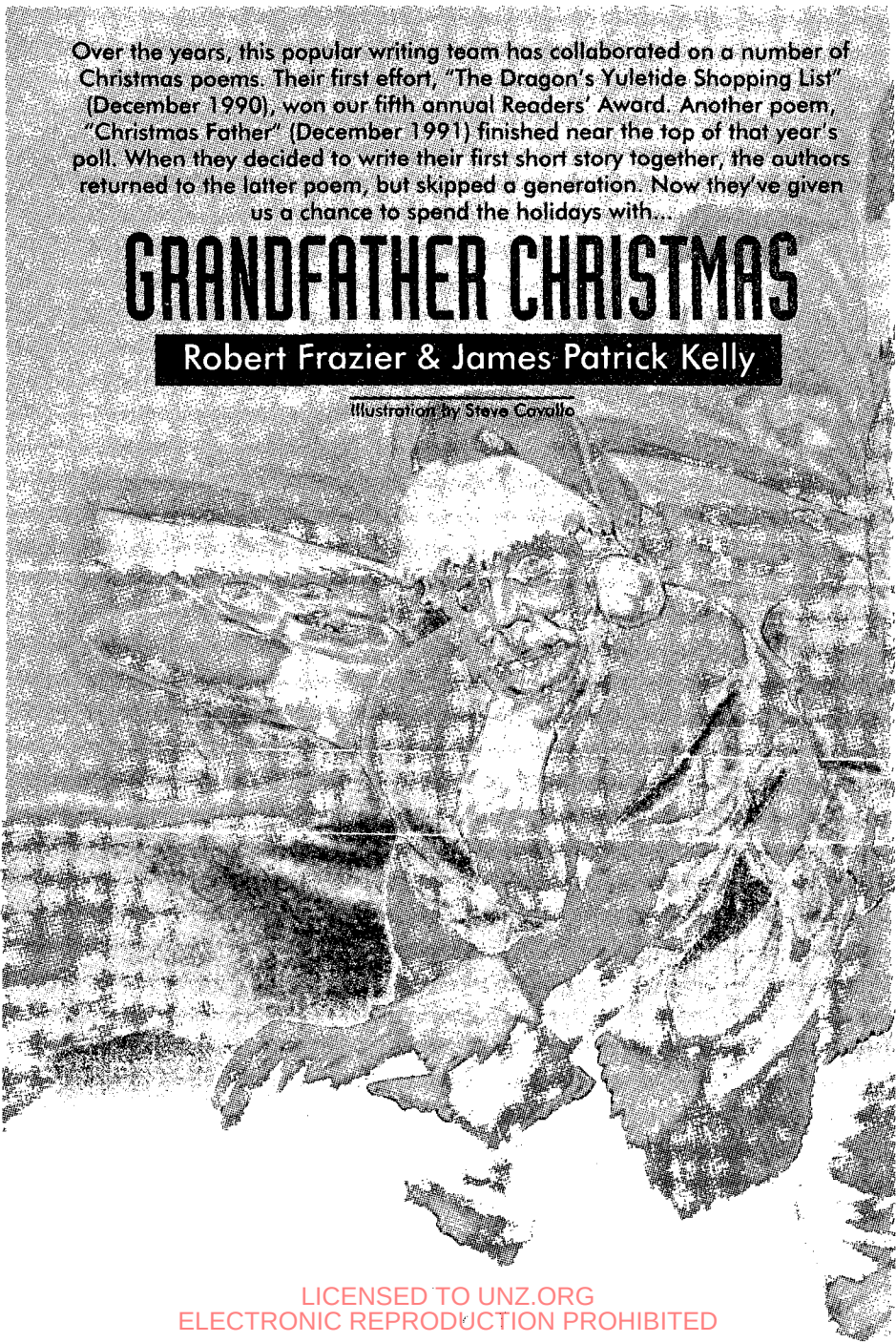
Over the years, this popular writing team has collaborated on a number of Christmas poems. Their first effort, "The Dragon's Yuletide Shopping List" (December 1990), won our fifth annual Readers' Award. Another poem, "Christmas Father" (December 1991) finished near the top of that year's poll. When they decided to write their first short story together, the authors returned to the latter poem, but skipped a generation. Now they've given us a chance to spend the holidays with...

GRANDFATHER CHRISTMAS

Robert Frazier & James Patrick Kelly

Illustration by Steve Cavalla



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We found Nick while we were snooping Grandma Brewster's attic. It was two days after the funeral, and the grownups still weren't paying any attention to us. We could hear them down in the living room, yelling at each other. This time, the argument was about Grandma's furniture. Mom claimed nobody would pay ten thousand dollars for the Hepplewhite sideboard, and Aunt Francie said then we'd have to sell off the portrait of sea captain Tristram Olaf Brewster, which Grandma had loaned to the Nantucket Whaling Museum. When Grandma was alive, no one dared raise their voice in this house. Especially on Christmas Eve.

"We shouldn't be doing this," said my cousin Aggie. She sat crosslegged on Grandma's bed, watching entry menus flash across the windowall.

"I know," I said. "That's what makes it fun."

"But what if they find out?"

"They're busy. Listen to them."

"I don't get it. Grandma was rich, so what's the problem? Besides, if they sell off all her furniture, what are we going to use *here?*"

I'd tried once before to get into the attic's upper-level files. I tricked the scuzzy driver with the BugUgly utility. I tried patching Dad's Ultrabook through a jumperop cable. I even hit caps-shift-escape with my left hand, enter-alt-home with my right, and F6 with my nose. But it wasn't a hardware problem; I was up against a software encryption lock. Grandma Brewster was old-fashioned about everything but security for her homebrain. She'd encrypted her attic with some kind of public key/private key system.

Of course, Grandma had caught me. She told me little girls shouldn't snoop. I told her I wasn't a little girl anymore, but I don't think she was ready to admit that to herself. "You'll just have to wait until you're older, Twilla," she'd said. "I promise I'll give you complete access someday." Well, I was a freshman in high school now and Grandma was in a bronze urn in the hall closet, and I needed to find out what was wrong with her will.

"They'll check the homebrain's log." Aggie was squeamish about bending rules, even for an eighth grader.

"It'll show us playing Witch Cop. I've got it faking moves."

"My mom will ground me until it's *my* funeral," said Aggie. "She's been pretty hard to live with since Dad moved out. And now . . ."

"No offense, Aggie, but your mom's been hard to live with for as long as I can remember."

Aggie twisted a strand of her perfect blonde hair. "You know, I loved Grandma a lot, and I'm going to miss her and everything . . . but I have this weird feeling." She glanced at me and then back at the windowall. "Like I'm kind of mad at her."

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"For dying?"

She nodded.

"Yeah," I said, "especially for *when* she died. Because from now on, her death is going to be part of Christmas."

I finally reached the attic door. When I tried to open it, the lock icon flashed and Grandma's homebrain prompted me for the passkey. Obviously, Aunt Francie had been expecting me. I pulled down the symbol menu and typed ✱❖✪❒▼❍✌✇. A silver key appeared next to the door.

"Hey, where did you get the passkey from?"

"Grandma." I touched my finger to the key and moved it to the lock icon. "I found it in my secret place, the day we got here." Each of us had private drop-offs where Grandma would leave notes and candy and even money sometimes. Mine was in the blue teapot on the mantle in the Federal parlor. "Here we go." The door opened, and we were in. Aggie moaned as I went to full zoom on the wall.

"See," I said, "most of it is junk." I surfed across neat waves of icons. There were to-do calendars that went back to the last century, tax returns, digitized family pictures, garden layouts, recipes, lots of old, old E-books. "You ever hear of Bret Easton Ellis?"

"Twil, this is making my stomach hurt."

"Like when we peeked in the coffin and Grandma's skin was all droopy like wax?"

"Twil!"

"Look, here's her calendar." I opened it. In the three weeks she had been in the hospital, Grandma had missed the Christmas Stroll, the Barretts' anniversary party at the Chanticleer, and a concert at the Chamber Music Center. I didn't see any last minute meetings with her lawyer, but there *was* one mystery.

"Hey, remember this?"

There was an icon with Nick's face pasted to December 19. Nicolas Cleary had been Grandma Brewster's second husband, Mom and Aunt Francie's stepfather. He was bald on top with salt and pepper short hair and big sideburns. His pudgy face was grooved by wrinkles. He had a little white mustache.

I hadn't seen his virt in years. When I was a little kid, she used to boot him when the whole family flew in for Christmas. It was a tradition, like baking reindeer cookies with red and green sprinkles, and decorating trees on the windowall, and Grandma's inedible sour cranberry sauce. Then, one year, she didn't bring him up. She said something about how he wasn't right. I thought that meant that his program was corrupted or decayed. So why schedule him again after all this time? I touched his icon.

First there was a blur, then his full figure came into focus, frame by

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slow frame, speeding up so that the image no longer looked like an oozy movement of bees. He was dressed in khakis and a red-and-black flannel shirt. His face was smooth: no wrinkles or mustache.

"Margaret, I need a new compression algorithm," he said. "Feel like I've been sleeping under the dock." He stretched, and when he extended a holographic arm out from the wall, I could hear the AV circuits hum. Then he saw me at Grandma's terminal. "Who the hell are *you?*"

"Twilla."

"Ellen's girl? I thought you were in fourth grade."

I was insulted. "I'm in high school."

"What's the date?"

"December 24, 2019."

"Oh my god, six years!" He morphed briefly into the figure from Munch's "The Scream." "She hasn't booted me for six goddamn years! And who's that, Agatha June?"

"Hi, Gramps." Aggie was beaming. She'd been Nick's pet when he was alive and his virt had continued to spoil her. "I thought you crashed."

"Who said that—not your grandmother? Where is she?"

"Oops," I said softly.

"Something's wrong." His image degraded into the bee swarm and then solidified again, rumpled and out of breath. He looked as if he had just fallen down the front stairs. "I can't get into the rest of the memory. I'm restricted!" His hair stood on end, stretched beyond the screen limits of the wall. "Margaret!" He called in a voice almost loud enough for Grandma to hear. "I didn't mean it!"

"Ssh! Nick, keep it down."

"*Agatha June Duffbart.*" Aunt Frances stood in the doorway, a vision of Christmas hell in her red pumps and a dress programmed to holly in a snowstorm and red wingtip glasses. "What is going on here?"

I said, "We were just playing Witch Cop, and I cast this opening spell at Sing Sing and all of a sudden we were in . . . in this."

"Is this true, Agatha June?"

I doubted Aggie could stand up to her mother's interrogation for long. "Check the log," I said in defense.

Nick's face filled the wall completely. "Francie, what's going on here? Something's happened to your mother."

"I'll take care of this." Aunt Francie nudged in front of me, taking my place at the terminal. "Leave the room, you two."

Aggie looked surprised. "What are you doing?"

"Twilla, Agatha June, go now! And shut the door behind you."

If I had known what she planned to do, I would never have left. But I thought we'd have a better chance of selling the Witch Cop alibi if we

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went into good girl mode. Besides, I didn't want to be there when Aunt Francie broke the news to Nick. It didn't take her long.

"Did he cry?" said Aggie.

"What did you tell him?" I said.

"I didn't tell *it* anything," she said coldly. "I wiped it from the system."

I couldn't believe this creature was related to me. She had about as much Christmas spirit as a salad fork.

"Y-you . . ." I stammered, "you bitch!" I knew it was trouble, but I couldn't help myself.

She glared at me. I turned it right back at her, certain that I'd never see Nick again.

Dad found me on the ledge of the third floor hall window, staring across the harbor at the beacon of Great Point Light, as it stretched through the night like a white finger. He wriggled through the casing and sat beside me. He didn't say anything at first, just swung his legs in the chilly air and pulled his cashmere sport jacket tight around him. It was the kind of thing only Dad would do. Mom was a worrier; she would've lectured me about how I was risking my life. Aunt Francie probably would've shut the window on me.

"You know," Dad said finally, "Grandma always said she liked winter better than summer on the island. It wasn't just that the tourists all went home. She said she could see things more clearly in cold air."

"Yeah, right. I guess now we can all see a certain person for what she really is."

"No need to be antagonistic."

"Sorry, but that woman makes me want to puke."

"Okay." He nodded. "But try to look at things from her point of view. She feels like everything's happening to her at once. First the divorce, then her mother dies . . ."

"Hey, she was my *Grandma*."

". . . and now she's in a panic over the estate."

"So she gets to yell at us whenever she wants? Dad, she's ruining my Christmas."

"She's family and she's hurting, okay? We have to make an effort to get along."

I hated arguing with Dad; he could see the good side to anything. "So why is she so worried? Is there some problem with the will?"

"The will?" He looked surprised. "No. Your mom and Francie split everything down the middle, whatever there is of it. The problem is that . . . well, your Grandma liked to keep secrets. Which is why her finances are a mess. Poor Francie feels like *she* has to clean things up."

"Is that what she calls wiping Nick? Cleaning up?"

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He sighed, his breath puffing in the cold. "Keep a family secret?"

I nodded.

"You were too little to realize this, but Francie never had any use for Nick. Not while he was alive, especially not for his virt. But she put up with it for Grandma's sake."

"So now I'm supposed to put up with *her?*" I snorted, then picked at the laces of my hightops. "She just doesn't like me, Dad. Remember that time with the candy dish?"

"Is it my imagination or are we freezing to death out here?" He shivered. "Look, there's a skim of ice on the harbor."

"I'm not groveling to her."

"I wasn't asking you to."

"What are you asking?"

"Just that we eat dinner in peace."

I considered this. "I can stop if she stops."

"Thanks." In the light of a beacon flash, I could see Dad's smile. "Oh, I guess I was supposed to do something about your . . . um . . . choice of language."

I stiffened. "Like what?"

He patted me on the back. "Francie made Grandma's special sour cranberry sauce. I wanted you to take some."

"I am *not* eating that . . . stuff."

"Then push it around a little," he said. "Just having it on your plate is punishment enough." As we wiggled back into the hallway, his jacket snagged on the head of a nail and ripped a pocket. "Wouldn't you know it?" he said.

The Fabfood cranked out the same dinner we'd had every Christmas Eve since forever: turkey with gravy, allnut stuffing, both sweet and mashed-flavored potatettes, butter broccoli bits. But everything else was different. I kept counting all the people who weren't there. Grandma, of course. Uncle Tom, Aggie's dad, who used to burp wisps of black smoke after dinner because of his enzyme problem. And flickery old Nick, who I hadn't missed for years.

I tried to be polite. Maybe Aunt Francie did too, but if you ask me, she didn't try halfway hard enough. I think it had become a Brewster Christmas tradition that the two of us fight. Meanwhile, Aggie was busy being sullen—no help there. Mom wanted to tell stories about when she and Francie were girls living on the island, which always seemed to end with Francie saving the day. Dad talked about the food, the weather, the elections, and all the boring shows he'd seen on the archaeology channel.

As dinner was winding down, Aunt Francie really got into it. She

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insisted that Aggie and I account for every nanosecond we'd been in the attic.

"And you're sure you didn't erase anything?" she asked.

"I'm sure," I said. "Are you? After all, it was *your* finger on the delete key."

"Well," she said to my mom huffily, "they're not in any memory I can access. I was sure she'd tucked them somewhere in the attic."

"What are you looking for?" I said. "Maybe I can help."

Aunt Francie looked back at me, squinting as if I were some germ she was seeing through a microscope. "Just some financial files we need to clear up Grandma's estate," she said.

"Oh," I said, "you mean really important stuff I'm too stupid to understand?"

"We think she must've hidden her assets," said Mom. "There's no way she could have afforded to live on what we've found so far."

Aunt Francie went back to picking on Aggie. "I still don't understand why you didn't buzz us immediately."

"What's immediately mean?" I interrupted her.

"As soon as he appeared. It's not your business to talk to him."

"Not my business?" said Aggie. "He was my grandpa!"

"Mine, too!" I said.

"I've told you before, Aggie," said Aunt Francie icily. "Your grandfather was Grandpa John. My father."

"Who none of us ever knew," I said.

Mom and Aunt Francie exchanged glances. "Aggie," said Aunt Francie, "we've just buried your grandmother. We're in the middle of trying to settle her business. And we're having a hard enough time without that . . . that graphical bigmouth distracting us." When she frowned, I could see little lines around her mouth, like someone had yanked a purse string tight. Aunt Francie was six years older and twelve times meaner than Mom. "Nick is dead," she said. "A virt is software, not a person. It shouldn't make demands."

"The truth is," Mom said, "that he—the virt—was driving Grandma crazy." Mom pushed a glob of purple cranberry sauce across her plate. "He claimed he really was Nick. He wanted to be left on all year long, said he needed a virtual address, network access, everything. He . . . *it* . . . preyed on her memories until she finally told me that she never wanted to see it again as long as she lived. She decided not to boot him again and she had every right to do it. He belonged to her."

"Then why didn't *she* erase him?" I said. "Why did she put him back on her calendar?"

"Ellen, would you please control your daughter?" Aunt Francie fixed

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me with a withering stare. "All this backtalk is a bad influence on Aggie."

"Look," said Mom, "we've all been under a lot of stress . . . ."

"Maybe that's your excuse," I said, "but your big sister has been bullying this family for years."

Aunt Francie's eyes bulged.

"Speaking of dressing . . ." Dad passed his plate.

"I do not bully people."

"No?" I said with a dramatic pause. "Then tell us why you've blocked incoming access to the house?"

That pricked up Dad's ears. "Is that true, Frances? My contract with the firm says twenty-four hours on call, no exceptions."

"It can't be helped. We can't have anyone trying to file a recovery on that virt."

I said, "What?"

Francie pointed at Mom. "I think your daughter stole the passkey. My guess is that she had outside help. I'm not letting her or any of her criminal friends tinker any further with our affairs."

I waited for Mom to stand up for me; I might as well have been waiting for a present from the King of England.

"*Francie,*" said Dad, "for Christ's sakes!"

I picked up my plate; we were eating off Grandma's best china. I was thinking of using some of it to express just how much I enjoyed these cozy family reunions when Aggie swooped by. She took the plate, slid it under hers, gathered my silverware, and stacked it carefully on the pile of dishes.

"Twilla promised to help me with my hair after dinner." She kicked my chair hard. "We can get *out* to the net, can't we?"

I looked to Aunt Francie. She grumbled, "Yes."

"Then I'm finished."

Mom nodded. "We'll trim the tree in the morning."

We were dismissed. I knew that Aggie had saved me just in time. I could feel steam in my ears, poison beading under my nails.

Mom was right about one thing. Grandma's death had been a strain on us all. She could be just as headstrong as Aunt Francie, but, like Mom, she listened when you talked to her. She had glued the two halves of the family together. So I thought it was strange when nobody cried at the funeral except Aggie. I kept waiting for Mom to cry, so I could. She was probably waiting for Francie; Mom wasn't herself when she was with her big sister.

I said as much to Aggie. We were sitting on the edge of the four-poster

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in the kids' room looking at ourselves mirrored on the windowall. We had linked the homebrain to HairNet and were trying on new styles.

"Yeah," said Aggie. "I don't know what's gotten into my mom either. Believe me, she's usually not wound this tight. I mean, remember last Christmas? When she had the silly stocking cap on and she was dancing around the living room with a holo of some old movie guy . . ."

"Tom Travolta."

"Yeah, and everyone was laughing at her. She was laughing too, remember?"

"Grandma put that hat on her."

We sat there for a moment thinking about all the differences between this Christmas and last. On the windowall, a cartoon hairdresser turned Aggie's hair candy-cane red.

"Want to see what Grandma left in *my* secret place?" said Aggie. She offered me a pair of dangle earrings, sculpted into a cascade of silver water. The bubbles in the cascade looked like tiny diamonds.

I held them up to the light. "They're really beautiful." I was jealous.

"Yeah," she said, "and they make me feel really guilty. I've been thinking maybe I should turn them over to Mom. Maybe they're worth something."

I arranged them on the bedspread in front of her. "Grandma left them to *you*."

"It's not like I really need more earrings." She picked them up. "Or any of this moldy old furniture either." She poured them from one hand to another. "But Twil, they wouldn't sell Grandma's house, would they?"

"They wouldn't dare," I said, but it felt like a lie. Selling your favorite place in the whole world was exactly the kind of thing grownups did to kids. I wanted to say something to cheer Aggie up, but I didn't know what.

Sitting in that room made me remember summer nights when Grandma used to tell me bedtime stories. She'd always change the main character to me. Twilla and the Beanstalk. Or she would make stories up. Brave Little Twilla and the Elephant Boy of Oz—I'd been astonished. Twilla's Christmas Wish. I'd be tucked right in this very bed, the sea murmuring outside, the fog horn bleating out on Brant Point. I brushed my hand across the patchwork quilt she had made before I was born and realized I wanted it for myself. I wanted to take it home and pull it around me when the wind howled through the streets of Boston. Whenever I needed to remember how my Grandma Brewster loved her best little girl.

"Your eyelighter is running." Aggie pulled a kleenex. "Left side."

I took it. "Thanks."

"You better watch out," said the hairdresser on the windowall. "You

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better not cry. You better not pout, I'm telling you why." The cartoon morphed into Nick. "You-know-who is coming to town."

"Gramps!" said Aggie.

"Ho-ho-ho!" he said.

"How did you survive?" I would've hugged him, only how do you hug an electron pattern on a windowall?

"That was just an alias file that Francie erased. When you told me that I'd been archived so long, I dumped my real self into Worldnet and ran. But I've got problems, girls. The failsafes on the net are snooping after me, and if they catch me, I'm dead as last year's batteries. I need a place to hide out. And there's no place like home for the holidays."

"Aunt Francie has shut down all incoming to the house," I said. "All we can get is read only."

"Santa taught me a couple of new tricks." He twirled his mustache. "If you can just get me Francie's private key code, I'll edit everything out of the log."

I turned to Aggie.

"Oh, no," she said. "We'll get in trouble again."

I stared an icicle at her.

"Okay, okay, never mind." She pushed me away. "Just go away while I enter it?" I stood by the window and listened to the clack of keys. "Voice override on commport 2," she said. "Revert to default for three seconds and then undo revert." Then for my benefit, she muttered, "So what if I spend high school chained to a doorknob?"

The wall shimmered like the surface of the harbor in a light breeze. Then Nick was standing between us, a filmy hologram projected from the windowall. He was wearing a Santa suit and was carrying a sack. "Thanks." When he moved, he trailed rainbows. "For a minute I was afraid you were going to tell me there was no room at the inn."

He put the sack down and started rummaging through it, muttering to no one in particular. "I have something." He brought a photo in a gold frame to the top of the bag. "No," he said, as if reminding himself, "this is for Frances." I only saw it for a second; it looked like some bride and groom standing in a garden. "Something else. Where the hell did I . . . oh, want to see what I got for Twilla's dad? He's the archaeology nut, right?" He showed us a cube with a lion sculpted on it. "Opens into a scale model of Persepolis. All the palaces, temples, tombs, treasure houses, even furniture." He reached deeper into the bag. "Tidings of comfort and joy," he sang under his breath, "comfort and . . . *ah!*" He came up with a handful of icons and threw them in our direction. They passed through us and rang like coins as they hit the windowall and stuck there. All the latest vids: Great Red Spot, Street French, Girls Live Girls, Bobby Science Down Under.

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Aggie touched the lump on Bobby Science's neck reverently. She had been in love ever since he'd had his larynx replaced with a twenty thousand voice synthesizer.

"You like this stuff?" said Nick. "I was lurking on some empty tracks in a recording studio and it just stuck to me."

"It's great," I said, "but how did you pay for them?"

"I'd better find a place to bed down." He yawned and stretched. "In case someone comes looking for me."

"Try Grandma's recipes," said Aggie. "There are lots of dead files to hide in."

Nick's face lost expression for a moment. "Dead files? Guess that's appropriate."

I said, "Nick, you did *pay* for those vids?"

He picked up the sack, slung it over his shoulder. "Ssh! What's that?" He gaped at us in astonishment. I froze, expecting the data cops or Aunt Francie to kick in the door. "Listen." He pointed at the ceiling.

"I don't hear anything." Aggie flattened herself against a wall so she could peek out the dormer window. "Where?"

"On the roof. Sounds like . . . *reindeer*." And then he was gone, his faint *ho-ho-ho* echoing into silence.

"He's such a lunatic!" said Aggie. She was laughing as she went to the terminal to make hard copies of the vids for herself. I wondered if she might be right. Maybe some of his files *had* been corrupted.

Or maybe he was the one who was corrupt.

I knew Aggie was asleep because she started making that little clicking sound in the back of her throat when she breathed. But as soon as I eased the covers off, Grandma's house started scolding me. Bedsprings creaked, floorboards moaned, doorknobs rattled, hinges squealed. It took me almost ten minutes to get upstairs to Grandma's bedroom without waking everybody up. It would have been quicker to use one of the downstairs terminals, but I needed the privacy.

"Nick," I whispered.

He wandered onto the windowall in an old-fashioned night shirt and a stocking cap. He was carrying a candle and his eyes were all squinchy, like he'd been asleep. I knew better, he was software.

" 'Twas the night before Christmas," he said, "when all through the house, not a creature was stirring, except Twilla the mouse."

"The louse," I said. "Twilla, the louse who let you in. Who are you?"

He brought the candle closer, as if to see me better. "I'm your Grandpa Nick."

I shook my head. "It's okay to pretend with Aggie, she's still a kid. You're not Nick. The question is, are you really his virt?"

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"How would I know so much about you all if I wasn't?"

"Virts don't steal stuff."

"I didn't steal anything," he said calmly. "I paid good money for those presents."

"Virts don't buy stuff either. Virts are like home videos. You're supposed to watch them and remember with them and feel good, and that's all. They don't mess with your *life*."

"Look, Twilla. Your Grandpa Nick knew about the cancer for a long time. He spent the last three years of his life getting ready to be dead. Making *me*. Cost him a fortune. He recorded hundreds of hours of reminiscences, loaded every experience he could simulate into the attic. The recipes, for example. His investment strategies. All his books. He wrote down his dreams every night. He didn't want to be just another ornament to be tucked away with the Nutcracker on the Saturday after New Year's. He wanted to cram as much of his mind into this attic as possible. He wanted to be conscious, to be himself."

"Did it work?"

He considered. "No." He shrugged, then closed his hand around the candle, which disappeared. "I'm not going to lie to you. I'm conscious all right, but I'm not exactly Nicolas Cleary." The nightshirt morphed into a business suit; the windowall changed into a mirror image of Grandma's bedroom. Nick's bedroom. "There's too much missing, spaces I have to fill in my own way. As I do, I become someone new. Or at least I would if that goddamned woman hadn't put me on a shelf for six years." He settled on the edge of the bed.

I was angry with him, with Grandma, my family and all their secrets, this whole rotten Christmas. "So what am I supposed to do with you?"

"Nothing, tonight. We'll sort this out in the morning. I'm working on a plan. So get some sleep, sweetheart. Do you know what time it is?"

"Half past my bedtime?"

He winked. "Merry Christmas." And switched off.

I punched him back up.

"What plan?"

"I need to work on the Grinch, find a way to keep her from stealing Christmas."

"Aunt Francie? She hates you."

"And I've never understood why. Your Grandmother loved me, and your mom. I took good care of them all—just look at this house."

"This is Grandma's house."

"Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-*la*." He shrank himself into the Christmas star. "Whose side are you on, Twil?" He twinkled and began to drift slowly off the wall.

I let him go. It was a good question.

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* * *

The kids' ornament time was a Brewster tradition that supposedly stretched back to the days of Captain Tristram. Before we opened presents on Christmas morning, the youngest member of each family brought a new ornament to put on the tree. We sat around the huge windowall in the living room, a screen fourteen feet tall and twenty feet wide. Dad set the program on auto. The graphic built slowly. The trunk pushed up from the floor and branched out limbs which sprouted needles. Lights blinked, tinsel glittered and the boughs bent under the imaginary weight of ornaments we had already hung. The homebrain breathed the scent of crushed balsam through the heating vents. Mom and Aunt Francie *ooed* and *ahhed* like silly little girls as piles of soft presents appeared under the tree beside the hard presents scattered in front of the wall.

I hadn't gotten enough sleep, and so I was pretty cranky when Dad began his speech. "Okay, you all know what today is. Christmas is a time when we put aside our personal differences."

"Got that, Aunt Francie?" I said.

"*Twilla*." I could tell that Dad was disappointed in me.

"I think we should get on with it," said Aunt Francie. "Aggie, do you have something for us?"

Aggie stood and went to the wall. She held up one of the dangling earrings. "This was Grandma's. She gave it to me." She turned, picked a spot high on the tree and held the earring to it long enough for the homebrain to make a copy.

"Twilla?" said Mom.

I stalked up to the wall and flattened my palm against it. Grandma had given the earrings to Aggie, the attic passkey to me. The way I figured it, she must have wanted me to find the icon she had pasted onto December 19. "Now, Nick," I said. When I pulled my hand away, his icon hung from the tree.

Aunt Francie tried to stand, but Mom forced her back down with a firm push on the shoulder. Aggie's eyes were as big as sugar cookies. Dad looked grim.

"You forgot somebody." I watched as the icon expanded into Nick, then projected out as a hologram pacing the room. He was wearing his Santa suit again, and he had his bag of presents. He was paler than he'd been yesterday; his colors needed more saturation. He looked about as tense as I felt.

"I'm sorry to barge in like this," he said. "I spent last night hiding in Margaret's sour cranberry sauce recipe, trying to think of what to say to you all. We have to talk."

He walked toward Aunt Francie, then right through where she sat on the couch. She twitched. "No, we don't."

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"Yes, we *do*," said Aggie. I was proud of her.

Nick walked into the end table that held our glasses and a pitcher of eggnog. The pitcher fell. Mom went to catch it and then froze as it passed through her hands and disappeared. The real pitcher stayed in place on the table. "You see, I need a place to stay, a permanent place. I don't want to be shut down anymore, and I need access to the net. That's all. And I'm willing to pay my way."

Aunt Francie snorted. "With what?"

"Your mother and I always kept our money separate, Frances. She insisted, even though she was not a rich woman. Before I died, I set up a trust and named her as sole beneficiary. She had complete use of the income for as long as she lived, although she couldn't touch the principal. Now that she's dead, I intend to make use of the trust."

"You can't," said Aunt Francie. "You have no legal status. In fact, as part of mother's estate, you belong to us. We own you."

He swelled into a giant; his head slipped in and out of the chandelier as he nodded. "Me, but not my *trust*. The trustees are instructed to dissolve it and donate the proceeds to charity should my master file be lost or corrupted."

"So *that's* how she could afford to keep this place," said Mom. "God knows what she spent all her own money on, but at least she could count on Nick's trust. Otherwise, she would've had to sell Brewster House years ago."

"I knew it." I was furious at her. "You are going to sell this house!"

"Mom," said Aggie, "Grandma promised that someday I could bring *my* kids here in the summer."

"This isn't a cottage, Aggie," Aunt Francie slumped dejectedly against the couch. "It's a mansion. After we get done paying the estate taxes . . ."

"Which brings me to my proposal." Nick shrank back to normal size. "Or should I call it my Christmas present? What if I cover the tax, pay you rent, and live here in the attic? You own the house; use it whenever you want. I'll manage my portfolio and stay out of your way, although I'd like permission to visit the girls. Oh, and one of you will have to act as my agent, since I can't enter into contracts or make transactions by myself."

"It's not *fair*." Aunt Francie muttered, almost as if she were talking to herself. "There's nothing left, nothing but the house. She should've warned me that she'd spent all her money. Maybe I could've done something."

"Nick's got the answer," said Mom. "It works, Francie."

"Nick," Aunt Francie said. "It's always *Nick* to the rescue, isn't it? He *bought* his way into this family, you know. You were too little to

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understand, but I was there. Dad wasn't even dead a year, less than a goddamned *year,* when he moved in!"

"Francie." Mom put an arm around her. I wasn't sure whether she was comforting her or holding her back. The rest of us just watched, speechless.

"Well, it's true!" Her voice was very small. Wounded. Then it was as if she realized what she had just said, because she covered her face with her hands and broke down. I had never seen Aunt Francie cry; it was scary. For the first time I realized that grownups are nothing but big kids with jobs. Nick, plain Nick in a gray suit, cocked his head and stared out at all of us with an odd choked smile. I wished I was on the other side of the wall with him.

"You're right, Francie," said Mom. "I never knew Dad. I wish I had. But Nick was a good father to me." I was stunned; I never would have expected my mom to save the day. "I think we should accept his present. It's Christmas, after all. Time to put differences aside."

All told, Aunt Francie allowed herself about three nanoseconds to feel her feelings. Then she drew her hands slowly down her face, fingertips digging the tears out of the wrinkles. When she looked at us, she was Mom's big sister again. The head of the Brewster family. "I agree," was all she said.

What we were supposed to do next was open presents. So we did, grateful to be saved from ourselves by Christmas tradition. There's nothing like unwrapping a truckload of new stuff to make you forget your troubles. They gave me four shirts, two sweaters, and a nice skirt which I probably won't ever wear because no one wears skirts at my school. Plus 3DTress, the fashion AI, and fifty hours on Worldnet. Aunt Francie gave Aggie the same Bobby Science vid that she'd gotten from Nick, but she didn't say anything. She seemed even more pleased than when Nick gave it to her. Dad's favorite present was his model of Persepolis; he was still playing with it during the Notre Dame game on New Year's Day. I thought we were going to have another disaster when Nick gave Aunt Francie his present. It was a wedding picture of Grandma and Grandpa John, Mom and Francie's father. Aunt Francie glanced at it and smiled and thanked him, and then quickly reached for another package. I could tell she was either touched or upset at herself for being touched, but she had shown us all the emotion we were going to see from her that day—or maybe that decade.

When we were finished the floor was scattered with enough paper to wrap the ferry, and Nick had been squeezed into 2D by a landslide of blinking icons. Our family had single-handedly saved the Massachusetts

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economy once again. Aunt Francie and Dad went off to the kitchen to program lunch.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!" Nick staggered backward across the windowall, merging with the tree. "So that's what she did with it."

"Who?" said Mom. "What?"

"I've just found the rest of Margaret's money. Or rather, it has found us."

"Great," I said.

"Maybe not." He looked like someone who had just seen a ghost. "Someone release the restriction on incoming data, please. Oh, that woman did love her secrets!"

Mom went to the terminal and set it to revert to default. Part of the wall started to sparkle; it looked like a diamond the size of a door.

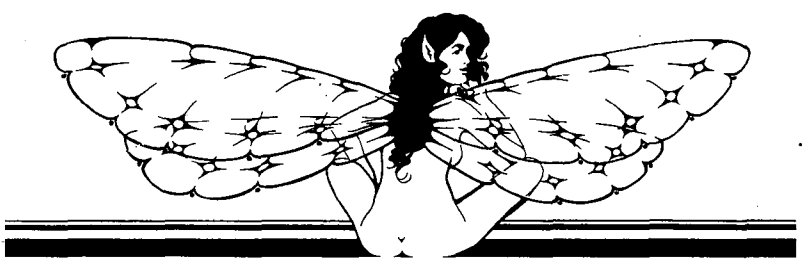
"It's about time you let me into my own house," said the sparkle. Then it resolved into a person. "Where's my sauce? We *always* have my sour cranberry sauce."

"Hi, Grandma!" Aggie squealed.

"Well, Margaret?" said Nick.

"Oh, Nick," Grandma said.

"Twilla," said Mom, her voice brittle as a glass angel. "Would you please ask your aunt to step in here?" ●



NEXT ISSUE

If you happen to be looking for a heaping-helping of headlong, fast-paced, flat-out adventure and pure entertainment, we have it for you next issue, as **R. Garcia y Robertson** returns with a wild new novella, our exciting cover story for Mid-December, "Werewolves of Luna." This is another of Garcia's patented paced-like-a-runaway-train stories, which *starts* with a space-suited man running out of air on the barren surface of the Moon, and from there runs us at full tilt through a gauntlet of

(continued on page 159)

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Esther M. Friesner

DEATH AND THE LIBRARIAN

Esther M. Friesner blames the following story partially on Terry Pratchett, who gave her a pair of Death and the Librarian miniature figurines from the role-playing game based on his Discworld books. Ms. Friesner's latest books include *Majyk by Hook or Crook* and *Majyk by Design*, both funny fantasies from Ace that complete the trilogy begun in *Majyk by Accident;* a *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* novel, *Warchild;* and *Alien Pregnant by Elvis!*—an anthology of tabloid SF stories that Bigfoot made her edit.

Illustration by Laurie Harden

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In an October dusk that smelled of smoke and apples, a lady in a black duster coat and a broad-brimmed hat, heavily veiled, called at Rainey's Emporium in Foster's Glen, New York. She descended from the driver's seat of a black Packard, drawing the eye of every man who lounged on the wooden steps of the crossroads store and attracting a second murmuring throng of idlers from Alvin Vernier's barber shop across the way. The men of Foster's Glen had seen a Packard automobile only in the illustrated weeklies, but to see a woman driving such a dream-chariot—!

However, by the time the lady reached the steps of Rainey's and said, "I beg your pardon; I am seeking the home of Miss Louisa Foster," she had become a middle-aged man in a plain black broadcloth suit, a drummer with sample case in hand and a gleaming derby perched on his head, so that was all right.

"Miss Foster?" Jim Patton raised one eyebrow and tipped back his straw hat as he rubbed his right temple. "Say, you wouldn't be a Pinkerton, now would you?" And the other men on Rainey's steps all laughed, because Jim was reckoned a wit as wits went in Foster's Glen, New York.

The gentleman in black smiled politely, and a trim moustache sprouted across his upper lip to give him a more dapper, roguish air. (This at the expense of his drummer's case, which vanished). "Yes, she's in trouble with the law again," he replied, turning the jape back to its source and stealing Jim's audience along with his thunder. "Lolling on the throne of an opium empire, I'm told, or was it a straightforward charge of breaking and entering?" He patted the pockets of his vest. "I'm useless without my notes." The idlers laughed louder, leaving poor Jim no hope but to drop the cap-and-bells and try the knight's helm on for size instead.

"That's a scandalous thing to say about a lady!" Jim snapped. "And about a lady like Miss Foster—! I can't begin to tell you all she's done hereabouts: church work, the Ladies' Aid, visiting the sick.... Why, she's even turned the east wing of the judge's house into a library for the town!"

"Is that so?" The stranger shot his crisp celluloid cuffs and adjusted a fat ring, pearl and silver, on his lefthand littlest finger. It twinkled into diamond and gold.

His remark was only a remark, but Jim Patton took it for a challenge to his honesty. "Yes, that's *so,*" he blustered. "And she's even set aside the money to make the judge's house over to the town for use as a library entire after she's gone."

"What does the judge have to say to all this?"

"What does—?" Jim gaped. "Why, you scoundrel, old Judge Foster's been dead these twenty years! What's your business with his daughter but mischief if you don't even know that much about the family?"

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"That would be business that concerns only Miss Foster and me," the stranger replied, and he grew a little in height and breadth of chest so that when Jim Patton stood up to face him they were an even match.

Still, Jim bellowed, "I'll make it my business to know!" and offered fists the size of small pumpkins for inspection. He was farm-bred and raised, born to a father fresh and legless returned from Gettysburg. Caleb Patton knew the value of begetting muscular sons to follow the plow he could no longer master, and Jim was his sire's pride.

The stranger only smiled and let his own muscles double in size until his right hand could cup Jim Patton's skull without too much strain on the fingers. But all he said was, "I am a friend of the family and I have been away." And then he was an old man, dressed in a rusty uniform of the Grand Old Army of the Republic, even though by rights the thick cloth should have been deep navy blue instead of black as the abyss.

The Packard snorted and became a plump, slightly frowsty looking pony hitched to a dogcart. It took a few mincing steps forward, sending the Emporium idlers into a panic to seize its bridle and hold it steady until the gaffer could retake his seat and the reins. Most solicitous of all was Jim Patton, who helped the doddering veteran into the cart and even begged the privilege of leading him to Miss Foster's gate personally.

"That's mighty kind of you, sonny," the old man in black wheezed. "But I think I can find my way there right enough now."

"No trouble, sir; none at all," Jim pressed. "When your business with Miss Foster's done, I'd be honored if you'd ask the way to our farm after. My daddy'd be happy to meet up with a fellow soldier and talk over old times. Were you at Antietam?"

The old man's tears were lost in the twilight. "Son, I was there too." And he became a maiden wrapped in sables against the nipping air. She leaned over the edge of the dogcart to give Jim a kiss that was frost and lilacs. "Tell Davey to hug the earth of the Somme and he'll come home," she said. She drove off leaving Jim entranced and bewildered, for his Davey was a toddler sleeping in his trundle-bed at home and the Somme was as meaningless to his world of crops and livestock as the Milky Way.

The lady drove her pony hard, following the directions Jim and the rest had given. Her sable wraps whipped out behind her in the icy wind of her passage. The breath of a thousand stars sheared them to tattered wings that streamed from her shoulders like smoke. Her pony ran at a pace to burst the barrels of the finest English thoroughbreds, and his hooves carved the dirt road with prints like the smiling cut of a sword. They raced over distance and beyond, driving time before them with a buggywhip, hastening the moon toward the highpoint of the heavens and the appointed hour.

At length the road Jim Patton had shown her ended at the iron gates

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of a mansion at the westernmost edge of the town. By the standards of Boston or New York it was only a very fine house, but in this rural setting it was a palace to hold a princess. Within and without the grounds trees shielded it from any harm, even to the insinuating dagger of curious whispers. The judge himself had ordered the building of this fortification on the borders of his good name, and the strain of shoring up his innumerable proprieties had aged wood and stone and slate before their time.

The maiden stepped out of the dogcart and shook out her silvery hair. The black kitten mewed where the pony had stood and sniffed the small leather portmanteau that was the only tiding or trace of the dogcart.

The elderly woman gathered up portmanteau and kitten, pressing both to the soft fastness of her black alpaca-sheathed bosom with the karakul muff that warmed her hands. She glanced through the fence's tormented iron curlicues and her bright eyes met only darkened windows. She had ridden into town with the twilight, but now she stood on the hour before the clocks called up a new day.

"None awake? Well, I am not in the least surprised," she commented to the kitten. "At her age, quite a few of them grow tired at this hour. It's almost midnight. Let us try to conclude our business before then. I have a horror of cheap dramatics."

Then she caught sight of a glimmer of lamplight from a window on the eastern side of the house. "Ah!" she exclaimed, and her breath swung back the iron gates as she sailed through them and up the long white gravel drive.

The front doors with their glass lillies deferred to her without the hint of a squeak from latch or hinges. She took a moment in the entryway to arrange herself more presentably. Her black-plumed hat she left on a porcelain peg beside a far more modest confection of gray felt and ivory veils, then studied her reflection in the oak-framed glass the hat-pegs adorned.

"Mmmmmm." She laid soft pink fingers to her lips, evaluating the dimpled, dumpling face and all its studied benevolence. "Mmmmno," she concluded, and the black kitten mewed once more as the handsome young man in gallant's garb took final stock of every black-clad, splendid inch of his romantic immanence. He opened the portmanteau out upon itself, and it turned into an onyx orb. He felt that when a woman spent so much of her life circumscribed by domesticity and filial attentiveness, she at least deserved to depart in more dashing company than that of a fuddy-duddy refugee from a church bazaar. He sighed over the glowing orb before he knelt to touch the kitten's tail. Was that a purr he heard from the heart of the black sword he raised in the silent hall?

He passed through corridors where clutter reigned but dust was chastened out of existence. His gaze swept the house for life and saw the

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cook snoring in her room below the rooftree, the maids more decorously asleep in their narrow iron beds. A proper housecat patrolled the kitchen, the pantry and the cellar, hunting heedless mice, dreaming oceans of cream. He noted each of them and sent his whispers into minds that slept or wakened:

"If you love him, tell him not to leave the farm for that factory job in New York City or the machines will have him."

"She must be born in the hospital, no matter how loudly your mother claims that hospitals are only for the dying, or she's as good as never born at all."

"Let the silly bird fly across the road; don't chase it there! The delivery man cannot rein back a motor-driven van in time and he does not know that you are a queen."

In certain times, in certain cases, he was allowed this much discretion: he might give them the means to forestall him, if they only had the wit to heed. Would he call it kindness? Ah, but in the end there were no whispered cautions that would avail. He could not change the fact he embodied, merely the time of its fruition. The grand black swan's wings he called into being as a final touch were neither grand nor black enough to hide him from the inevitability of himself.

Still, he thought she would appreciate the wings, and the way he made the black sword shine and sing. He came to the east wing, to the door past which the library lay. He knew the room beyond. Every wall of it was armored with bookshelves, except for the interruption of a massively manteled fireplace and where a pair of heavy French doors framed a view of the hill sloping down to the town. He had entered that room twenty years ago, wearing somber juridical robes and a bulldog's grim, resigned expression as he informed Judge Foster of the verdict *sans* appeal. Then his hands had been blunt as the words he had spoken. Now his fingers were long and pale as he touched the orb to the doorknob and let himself in.

She looked up from the book she was reading. "Hello," she said, closing the buff-colored volume and laying it aside on the great desk of rosewood and brass. A snowy wealth of hair crowned her finely featured face. Lamplight overlaid with a dappled pattern of roses shone on the fair hands she folded in the lap of her moire dress, a gown so lapped in shades and meanings of black that it left his own dark livery looking shabby by comparison. Her expression held recognition without fear.

"Were you expecting me?" he asked, rather taken aback by the calm she wore draped so gracefully around her.

"Eventually," she replied. Her smile still had the power to devastate. "Isn't that the way it is supposed to be?" She rose from the high backed chair and the bottle-green leather moaned softly to give her up from its

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embrace. "Father always told me I'd go to Hell, though he'd beat me black and blue if I so much as pronounced the word. Now that I've said it, I assume that's my destination." Her eyes twinkled, and in the air before them fluttered the ghost of a long-vanished fan. "Is it?"

The swan's wings slumped, then trickled away entirely. The gallant's costume diminished to the weedy suiting of a country parson. The sword lingered only long enough for him to realize it was still in his hands, an embarrassment. It shrank posthaste to become a raven that hopped onto the parson's shoulder and croaked its outrage at being transformed into so inappropriate an accessory. At least the orb had possessed the good taste to become a well-thumbed copy of Scripture.

"I—ah—do not discuss destinations."

"Not even to tell me whether it will be all that much of a change from Foster's Glen?" She owned the miraculous ability to be arch without descending to kittenishness.

"I am—er—I am not at liberty to say," he replied, polishing the lozenges of his pince-nez with a decidedly unclerical red kerchief he yanked from a trouser pocket.

"What are you at liberty to do, then?" she asked. "Collect the dead?"

"Er—ah—souls, yes. In specific, souls." He settled the lenses back on the bridge of his nose. "One does one's duty."

"One does it poorly, then," she said, and there was a great deal of bite to the lady's words.

Her vehemence startled him so that he did a little jump in place and bleated, "Eh?"

She was happy to explain. "If souls are what you gather, I said you do a shoddy job of work. You could have had mine twenty-five years ago. I had no further use for it. But to come now—! Hmph." Her small nose twitched with a disdainful sniff that had once broken aspiring hearts.

"Twenty-five years a—?" He made the pages of his Bible flutter as he searched them with a whirlwind's speed. His eyes remained blank as he looked up again and inquired, "I *am* addressing Miss Louisa Foster?"

The lady sighed and moved toward the nearest wall. From floor to ceiling it was a single, continuous tidal wave of books. The musty smell of aging ink and paper, the peculiarly enchanting blend of scents from cloth and leather bindings, sewn spines and the telltale traces of all the human hands that had turned those pages enveloped her like a sacring cloud of incense as she took a single volume down.

"So it is true," she said, looking at the text in her hands instead of at him. "Death does mistake himself sometimes."

"But you are—?" he insisted.

"Yes, yes, of course I am!" She waved away his queries impatiently. "Louisa Jane Foster, Judge Theophilus Foster's only child, sure to make

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a brilliant marriage or Father would know the reason why. A brilliant marriage or none. Father gave me as few choices as you do."

She replaced the book and took down a second one, a cuckoo among the flock of fine leather-fledged falcons. It was only bound in yellowing pasteboards, but when she opened it a scattering of scentless flower petals sprinkled the library carpet. The laugh she managed as she paged through the crumbling leaves trembled almost as much as her smile.

"Have you ever heard of a man named Asher Weiss? More than just in the way of business, I mean. Did you know he was a poet?" She did not look disappointed when her caller admitted he did not. "I didn't think so." Her eyes blinked rapidly. "And the rest of the world is now as ignorant as you.

"There is a poem in here called 'For L.'," she said. "I don't think seven people alive today ever read it. But I was one who did. He wrote it and I followed a trail of words into his heart, like Gretel seeking a way out of the darkling wood by following trails of pebbles and breadcrumbs." She stooped to gather up the petals in her palm and slip them back between the pages. "Not very brilliant, as matches go; nothing his faith or mine would willingly consecrate, so we made do without consecration. We two—we three soon learned how hard it is to live on pebbles and breadcrumbs." She slid the booklet back onto the shelf.

"May I?" He helped himself to the poet's pasteboard gravestone and read the dead man's name. "But this man died more than twenty-five years since!" he protested.

"And did I ever protest when you took him?" she countered. "At least you left me . . . the other." Her mouth hardened. She snatched the booklet from him and jammed it back between its more reputable kin. "A consolation, I imagined; living proof that God did not solely listen to Father's thundered threats. For awhile I dreamed I saw the face of a god of love, not retribution, every time I looked down into his laughing eyes, so like his father's. Oh, what a fine joke!" She plucked a random volume from the shelf and flipped it open so that when she spoke, she seemed to take her words from the printed lines before her. "With all the best jokes, timing is everything."

She held the timorous parson's gaze without mercy. "Is sickness your purview too? Is hunger? Is fever? Or are you only there to settle their affairs in the end? That time—crouching by the bed, holding his hand—I wanted it to be me you took, not him. God knows how he would have gotten on without me—maybe Father's heart would have softened to an orphan's plight. . . ." Her smile was bitter as she shook her head. "No. I only read fairy tales. It is for the children to believe in them."

She looked up. "Do you like children, Death?"

Before he could answer, she folded the book shut. "I know," she said.

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"Ask no questions. Bow your head. Accept." She jabbed the book at the judge's portrait above the fireplace and her voice plunged to a baritone roar: *"Your choices will be made for you, girl! When I want your opinion, I'll give it to you!"* She clapped the book between her hands and laughed. "You would think I would have learned my lessons better than that by now, living with the voice of God Almighty. Almighty . . . whose word remakes the world according to his desires. You know, I never had a Jewish lover, never had a bastard child. When I did not return with Father from New York City, all those years that I was gone from Foster's Glen, I was studying music abroad, living with a maiden aunt in Paris. So I was told. The townsfolk still think I am a lady."

"But you are!" he exclaimed, and the raven sprang from his shoulder to flit beneath the plaster sunbursts on the ceiling.

"You are as happily gulled as they, I see." She extended her hand and the bird came to rest upon it. "I am sorry," she told it. "We have no bust of Pallas for your comfort here, birdie. Father viewed all pagan art as disgraceful, because like my Asher, so few of its subjects seemed able to afford a decent suit of clothes."

"Well, ah—" The parson took a breath and let it out after he had comfortably become a gentleman in evening dress, offering her his arm and the tribute of a rose. "Shall we go?"

"No." The lady laughed and kissed the bird's gleaming plumage. "Not yet."

"Not—? But I thought—?" He cleared his throat and adjusted the starched bosom of his shirt. "From the warmth of your initial greeting, Miss Foster, I assumed you were quite willing to accept me as your escort tonight."

"How gallant," she said, her words dry as those ancient petals. "And at my age, how can I refuse so fine an offer? I cannot. I only wish to defer it."

"So do they all," he responded. "But this is the appointed time."

She ignored his summons, moving with a smooth, elegant carriage to the portrait above the mantel. She aped the judge's somber look to the last droop of jowl and beetling of brow as she thundered, *"Where is the blasted girl? Will these women never learn to be on time?"* She rested her free hand on the cool marble as she gazed up into the judge's painted scowl. "How long did you wait for me in the lobby of our hotel, Father, before you realized I had flown?" She looked back at her caller. "If I found the courage to keep him waiting, I have little to fear from baiting Death."

The stranger coughed discreetly into a black-gloved hand. "I am afraid that I really must insist you come with me now."

"Why should I come to you when you would not come to me?" Her eyes

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blazed blacker than the raven's feathers, blacker than the curl of downy hair encased in gold and crystal at the neck of her high-collared gown. "I called you and you would not come. Why? Couldn't you hear me? Was the rain falling too hard on the tiny box, or was the echo from the hole they'd dug for him too loud? I doubt it. They never dig the holes too deep in Potter's Field. Or was it the rumbling of the carriage wheels that drowned out my voice when *dear* Cousin Althea came to fetch me home again? Ah, no, I think perhaps it might have been impossible to hear my cries to you above the fuss she raised because she was so overjoyed to have 'found' me at last."

She slammed the book down on the mantel. "Of course it was impossible for her to have found me earlier, when all she had was my address on any of a dozen letters; letters I sent her pleading for money, for medicine, for the slightest hint of compassion. . . ." She sank down suddenly on the hearthstone, frightening the raven to flight.

He knelt beside her and took her in his arms. Her tears were strong reality against his form of smoke and whispers.

"You have waited so long," she murmured, her breath in his ear warm and alive. "Can't you wait a little longer?"

"How much longer?" He smelled the lavender water that she used after her bath and felt the weary softness of her old woman's skin, her old woman's hair.

"Only until I finish reading." She laid her hands on his shoulders and nodded toward the desk where the buff-covered book still lay.

"Is that all you ask? Not days, not months, only until—?"

"That is all." Her hands clasped his. "Please."

He consented, only half comprehending what he had granted her. All she had said was true: His was the discretion that had assumed there was no truth behind a woman's pleas. So many of them cried out *Let me die!* who thought better of it later. Only when he was compelled to greet them below the railing of a bridge or with the apothecary bottle still in hand was he assured of their sincerity, and Miss Louisa Foster had not sought either of those paths after her cousin Althea fetched her home. *Hysterical* and *She'll get over it* tapped him on the shoulder, leering. He did have memories.

Still dressed for dancing, he helped her to her feet. She returned to her place in the green leather chair and took up the buff-covered book again. "To think I don't need spectacles at my age. Isn't it wonderful?" she said to him. And then: "You must promise not to frighten them."

He nodded obediently, although he had not the faintest idea of what she meant. He recreated himself as a lady of her own age and bearing, a tangle of dark tatting in her hands, a woolly black lapdog at her feet,

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the image of the poor relative whose bit of bread and hearthfire is earned with silence and invisibility.

The coach clock on the mantelpiece struck midnight.

The French doors creaked as a little hand shyly pushed them open. A dark head peered around the edge of the door. *Mother?* the wind sighed.

She did not look up from the open book as the child blew across the carpet and settled into her shadow. The small head rested itself against her knees and thin, milky fingers that should have been pink and plump and scented with powder instead of mold reached up to close around her hand.

Read to me.

"Why, Danny, I am surprised at you," she said softly. "You know we can't begin without your friends."

The wind blew more phantoms through the open doors, gusts and wracks and tumbling clouds of children. They swept into the darkened library, whirling in eddies like the bright autumn leaves outside, catching in snug corners, in favorite chairs before the breath of their advent died away and left them all sitting in attentive order around Miss Louisa Foster's chair.

The stranger felt a tiny hand creep into hers, a hand whose damp clasp she had last disengaged as gently as she could from the breast of the young, despairing mother fated to survive the plunge the child did not. It was not the stranger's place to ask what became of her charges after she called for them. The child tugged insistently at her hand, then clambered up into her lap uninvited. She settled her head against the lady's shawled shoulder with a contented sigh, having found someone she knew. Her feet were bare and her golden hair smelled of factory smoke and river water.

"Now, shall we begin?" Miss Foster asked, beaming over the edge of the open book. Smiles answered her. "I think that if you are all very good, tonight we shall be finished with Tom Sawyer's adventures, and then—" Her voice caught, but she had been raised with what Judge Foster liked to call "breeding." She carried on. "—and then you shall rest."

She raised her eyes to the patient caller in the other chair. "You see how it is? Someone has to do this for them now. They were lost too young for anyone to share the stories with them—the old fairy tales, and Mother Goose, and *Kim,* and the legends of King Arthur, and *The Count of Monte Cristo,* and—and—oh! How can children be sent to sleep without stories? So I try."

"When—?" The lady with the lapdog wet her lips, so suddenly dry. "When did they first come to you?" The child leaning against her shoulder

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shifted, then pounced on the tangled tatting in her lap and sat happily creating a nest of Gordian knots as complex and as simple as the world.

"They came soon after I made over this room to be the town's library, after Father was dead. I scoured the shelves of his law books and filled them with all the tales of wonder and adventure and mischief and laughter they could hold. I was seated right here one midnight, reading aloud to myself from Asher's book of poetry, when the first one came." She leaned forward and fondly ruffled the hair of a little boy whose pinched face was still streaked with coal dust. "I never guessed until then that it was possible to hunger for something you have never known."

Then she bent and scooped up the child who held so tightly to her skirts. She set him on her lap and pressed his head to the high-necked, extremely proper sleekness of her dress front. The little ghost's black hair curled around the brooch that held his single strayed curl.

"One night, he was here with the rest. Come all the way from New York City, can you imagine that? And the roads so cold." Her lips brushed the white forehead. "So cold." She set him down again among the rest and gave the stranger a smile of forced brightness. "I've found that children sleep more peaceably after a story, haven't you?" Before her caller could reply, she added, "Please forgive me, but I don't like to keep them waiting."

Miss Foster began to read the last of Tom Sawyer's adventures. The oil lamp smoothed away the marks of fever and hunger and more violent death from the faces of the children who listened. As she read, the words slipped beneath the skin, brought a glow of delight to ravening eyes. In her own chair, Miss Foster's caller became conscious of a strange power filling the room. The ghosts were casting off their ghosts, old bleaknesses and sorrows, lingering memories of pain and dread. All that remained were the children, and the wonder.

At last, Miss Foster closed the book. "The. End," she announced, still from behind the stiffness of her smile. The children looked at her expectantly. "That was the end, children," she said gently. "I'm afraid that's all." The small ghosts' eyes dimmed. By ones and twos they drifted reluctantly from the lamplight, back toward the moonlit cold.

"Wait."

The stranger stood, still holding the little girl to his chest. He was dressed as a road-worn peddler, with his goods on his back and a keen black hound at his heels. He dropped his dusty rucksack on the rosewood desk and plunged his arm inside. "Here's *Huckleberry Finn,*" he said. "You'll have to read them that after they've heard *Tom Sawyer.*" He dug more books from the depths of the bag, piling each on each. "Oh, and *The Three Musketeers. Uncle Tom's Cabin. Little Lord Fauntleroy* . . . well, it takes all kinds. And *David Copperfield, Treasure Island, Anne of Green*

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Gables, 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea, Sarah Crewe—" He stared at the tower of books he had erected and gave a long, low whistle. "I reckon you'll have the wit to find more."

She seized his wrist, her voice urgent as she asked, "Is this a trick? Another joke that Father's own personal god wants to play on me?"

"No trick," he said. "I shall come back, I promise you that, Miss Louisa. I'll come back because I must, and you know I must."

She touched the mourning brooch at her throat. "When?"

"When I promised." His eyes met hers. "When you've finished reading."

He placed the girl-child in her lap, then lifted up her own lost son; together they were no more burden than the empty air. Her arms instinctively crept around to embrace them both and he placed an open book in her hands to seal the circle. "Or when you will."

"I don't—" she began.

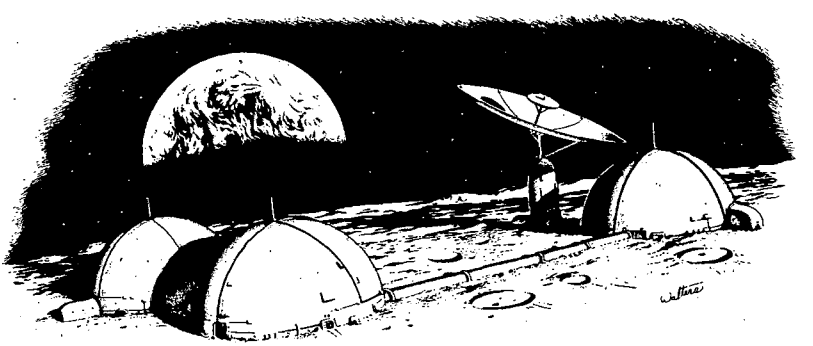
"Read."

He shouldered his rucksack and whistled up his hound. The ghostly throng of children gazed at him as he passed through their midst to the French doors. Outside there was still smoke and apples on the air, and a thousand tales yet to be told. He paused on the threshold and turned to see her still sitting there in the lamplight, staring at him.

"Give them their stories, Louisa," he said, his face now aged by winds and rains and summer days uncountable. "Give them back their dreams."

"Once—" She faltered. The children drew in nearer, faces lifted like flowers to the rain. "Once upon a time . . . "

He watched as the words took them all beyond his reach, and he willingly let them go. He bowed his head beneath the moon's silver scythe blade and took a new road, the black dog trotting beside him all the way. ●



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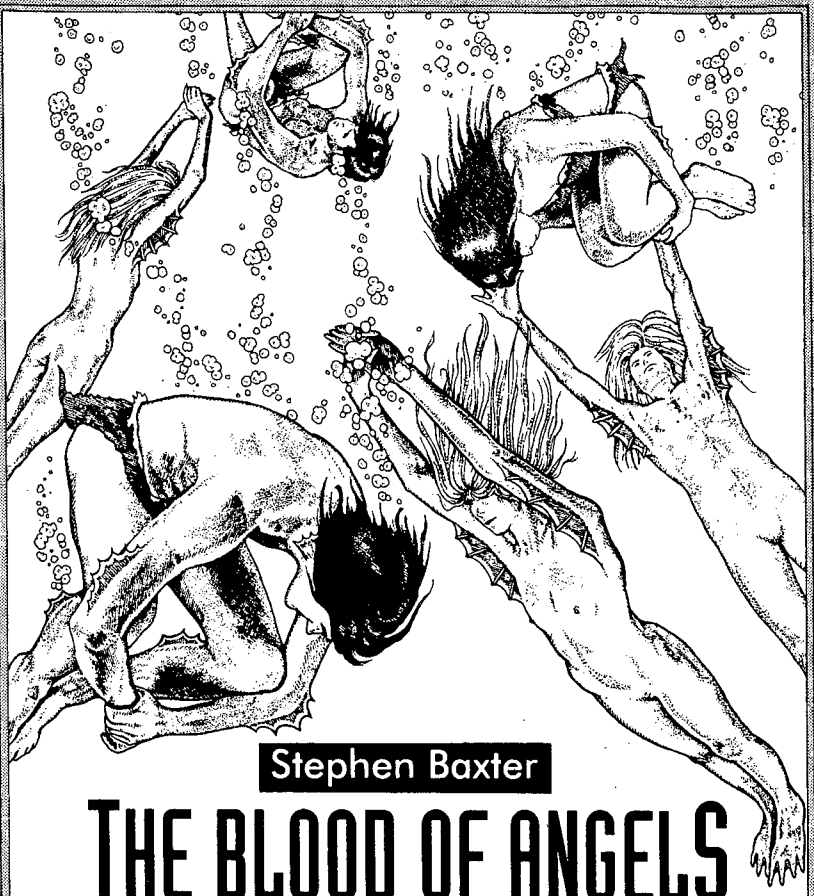

Stephen Baxter

THE BLOOD OF ANGELS

Stephen Baxter's interests include badminton, soccer (as a spectator only), physics, cosmology, and mathematics. He works part time in information technology and continues turning out novels at a mad ppace. His most recent British publications are *Flux* (December 1993) and *Ring* (July 1994). *The Time Ships* will be out next spring, and *Ares* will follow in September. In the U.S., Mr. Baxter's novel, *Anti-Ice*, has just been released by HarperPrism. Their edition of *Flux* will be out in April.

Illustration by Ron Chironna

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The Angel's singing—multitonal, delicate as air-snow—came to him through water still winter-crisp.

Carver opened his eyes. The last few ice crystals embedded in his flesh made his eyelids crackle, and prismatic forms—crystals within the eyeballs—moved across his retinae.

People rained from the frozen surface above him, arms wrapped around their legs, down toward the Shelf floor. There were Angels everywhere, singing, touching the sleeping people.

Lyra's face swam before him, smiling, translucent. The Angel's bare body was still skeletal from last autumn's fast, and her pale bones shone through her flesh. Her hands were moving over his body. He could barely feel her touch; it felt as if layers of chitin had been plated over his dulled senses. She seemed to be caressing him, welcoming him to the new, month-long summer. He was tempted to close his eyes, to relax in her soft attention . . . .

He felt her lift away the heavy pack of tools from his waist.

His eyes snapped open. *Something was wrong.*

"Lyra?" His voice was a croak, barely carrying through the chill water.

She smiled; through the ghostly flesh of her neck he could see vocal cords shimmer as she sang in harmony with herself. But she clutched his tool bag—a simple thing of woven weed, attached to a belt of rope.

Beyond her, Angels swam coolly through the defenseless rain of people. The Angels were carrying away tools, clothes, food caches—even weapons: spears, knives of bone.

Carver grabbed Lyra's arm. Sheets of his flesh, frozen, ruined—peeled away from him, exposing new, pink skin. "Lyra . . . what are you doing?"

Her flesh was soft, hot; she recoiled from his touch, uncomprehending distress distorting her face.

His brain seemed still to be half-frozen; he struggled to force it to work. Lyra couldn't answer him, of course; Angels had no speech—not even the guttural, verb-free sub-language of the Baskers.

But Angels weren't thieves, either. They'd never been known to steal from True Humans before—especially in the few brief days after the spring thaw, when the sleepless Angels were the first creatures to recover, to begin functioning, with True Humans—and every other Shelf creature—still half-frozen, unconscious, vulnerable.

Unlike people—and Baskers, and Anglers—Angels didn't freeze. They didn't have to sleep through the eleven-month winter; they stayed conscious, entombed in the ice, making up their beautiful songs.

He took the tool kit from her unresisting grasp.

"Baskers!"

It was the voice of Hunter, his wife.

Carver turned in the water. Hunter—squat, muscular, middle-aged,

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her hair tied back from her brow—swam through the cloud of stirring people. Layers of dead flesh flaked from her limbs, but she was moving purposefully, slapping and pushing the adults to make them wake faster. She carried her spear of chitin and wood. The spear was fouled, stained by smears of something clear, sticky—

Angel blood.

The chill of the spring water sank deep into Carver's bones; he felt as if he would never be warm again.

Hunter saw him staring at her. She pointed past him. "Baskers incoming! *Move!*"

No one had killed an Angel—a harmless, beautiful Angel—ever before . . . .

The Baskers were coming down on them in a great wall across the ocean. Their huge mouths were clamped shut, and in their wide, clumsy hands they clutched their own crude weapons—shards of chitin, bits of rock—and, he saw, True Human weapons: knives, spears, bows.

Human weapons, stolen for them by the Angels.

Too much was happening, too fast. Carver cast about for a weapon. But the knife at his waist was gone, and the cache of spears and nets he'd helped gather, just before the winter sleep, was vanished.

Stolen by Angels?

He turned to face the Baskers, his fists bunching.

Silhouetted against the ruddy sunlight, a burly female dropped from the ice-coated surface at Carver.

Hair like weed, white and thin, straggled across her broad, flat skull. Her eyes were buried deep in pits of bone. Her limbs were spread wide, her elbows and knees bent, and she clutched a True Human knife—perhaps it was even his own.

He tipped backward in the water, bringing up his arms and legs.

The Basker's body smacked into his, full on. Nipples like pebbles pressed into his chest, and she scrabbled at his back, nails like claws raking his flesh. Her huge mouth loomed before his face, a translucent carvern, and he could see sunlight through the filtering gills at the sides of her immense throat. That mouth was designed to filter out immense quantities of plankton and krill, as the Baskers swam in their great schools through the Shelf waters . . . .

But she wasn't feeding now. If the knife didn't get him, she could simply smother him by wrapping his face and head in that huge, enclosing mouth.

He brought up his knees, trying to prise her away. He had to ignore the looming mouth before him. *The knife. Where was the knife?* Her free

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hand was still working at his back—he ran his left hand along her bony arm—so the knife must be—*there!*

He felt the blade lunge into his hand; it passed through the webbing between his thumb and forefinger. But there wasn't much pain. Clearly unused to the weapon, the Basker was holding the knife handle awkwardly, too high.

He closed his palm around the knife. The stone blade rasped into his flesh, and he felt his palm grow slick with blood. But he had it, and with a twist—*oh, the pain now* as the blade scraped against bone—he was able to wrench the knife out of her grasp.

The knife slipped away from his bloodied fingers.

The Basker, enraged, shrieked into his face. He could smell foul brine, see scraps of krill clinging to the back of her throat.

Now she had both her legs wrapped around his waist; she tore at his back, and pounded the side of his head. He tried to fight back. But she was out of reach of his legs and knees. Her skin was hard, leathery—still winter-dehydrated—but her muscles, toned by a life of steady swimming, were like boulders.

She was crude, stupid, little more than an animal. It was impossible to believe that Baskers were humans too, cousins of True Humans. But it *was* the truth; every person was born knowing it. And this Basker was *strong*, and she was going to win.

Unless . . .

With his right hand he reached down to the tool bag at his waist. He scrabbled at his back, at the loose knot in the rope belt at the base of his spine. In a few heartbeats, working blind and one-handed, he had it free—and then almost lost the bag altogether, as the Basker-woman pounded his head and back.

He reached out, past the Basker—to an onlooker this must seem like some obscene embrace, he thought distantly—and with his right hand he wrapped the rope belt around his left wrist.

Then he dragged his arms up and over the Basker's head, and down before her face. With a quick motion he wrapped the rope backward, around her neck—and with all his strength he *shoved.*

The Basker's eyes, deep in the leather mask of her face, stared at him, resentful, dimming. The scrabbling at his back and face grew in intensity, until it was as if independent animals were gouging into him. She coughed, and a huge, obscene mass of half-digested krill erupted from that cavernous neck and spewed into his face.

But he held on. And *so did she,* obviously unaware that he depended on the leverage she was giving him by clinging to his waist with her legs. He felt the rope saw through the dehydrated flesh at her neck. Her blood stained the water before his face; it tasted sharp and salty.

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Then her arms fell away, limp. That huge mouth, the distended caves of cheeks, lost their shape.

He had to peel her locked legs away from his waist. He pushed the corpse away from him. Sheets of pain creased his back, face and hand.

Bloodied, gasping, still winter-weak, he stared around.

Baskers moved through the rain of people, clubbing at heads and chests at will. Blood billowed through the water. Carver saw a splinter of rock—held in a broad Basker fist—slice open the chest of a squirming child; the other fist reached into the chest and pulled aside white, gleaming ribs, exposing organs like pale worms.

It was a slaughter.

The Baskers couldn't be after food—they didn't eat True Human food, let alone Human *flesh*.

Could it be that the Baskers simply wanted to *destroy* the Humans?

He heard the distant, thin voice of Hunter; she had moved out of the battle cloud.

"Flee! Flee!"

Carver grabbed at his tool bag and began to swim, pain lancing through his joints. Around him, other surviving Humans—adults, a few children—emerged from the cloud of death, dulled, many wounded, bemused.

He looked back once. The Baskers still worked at unresisting bodies, pounding and gouging in a frenzy, their motions indistinct in the blood cloud.

And beyond them, a school of Angels sported through the water. They sang and played, oblivious of death.

Twenty True Humans survived, of over fifty. And of the twenty, only six were children.

They fled across the Shelf, seeking out their hunting grounds at its lip.

Hunter and Carver had borne one child of their own—a boy, who had failed to revive after a winter's hibernation, three or four seasons earlier. They had mourned the child. Strangely, Carver thought, that period just after the boy's death was the closest they had ever been.

But the world—the endless pressure of hunger, of summers which flew by and winters which closed around them like fists—gave little room to grieve.

Hunter had withdrawn into her own deep, frozen ocean, somewhere inside her head—a place Carver had never been able to reach. Somehow they had not considered having another child. Now, as Carver surveyed the straggling, exhausted, bloodied band of survivors, that choice seemed irresponsible.

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For as far as anyone knew, there were no other True Humans, anywhere in all the seas of the world.

Once they saw a school of Baskers. The True Humans dove down to the bare, rocky floor of the Shelf. The Baskers—a hundred or more—cruised overhead in their dull, stolid way. Their huge legs beat in patient formation at the water, and the sunlight illuminated the interiors of their gaping, ballooned mouths as they scoured krill from the ocean.

Lyra, the Angel, followed the True Humans.

Carver saw her behind them, distant, wary, clearly scared and confused. *She doesn't understand what she's done,* he thought. *She really doesn't know what this means.*

The other Humans didn't seem to have noticed her. He tried to shoo her away—he even shook his fist at her, silently, trying to scare her off. If the True Humans got hold of her now . . . .

But she couldn't understand. She smiled back at him, the bones of her skull shining through her clear flesh, clearly wondering what new game he was playing.

He turned his back on her and swam close to Hunter, his wife.

Oblivious to the True Humans' despair, the world around them blossomed gorgeously, making as much of the brief summer as it could. The residual surface ice was reduced to a thin shell, almost transparent; diatoms, flagellates and algae absorbed the ice-filtered sunlight, filling the ocean like blue-green dust. Polychaete worms, sea butterflies and krill, liberated from their own icy prisons, wriggled through the newly rich waters, gorging.

The richness of the warming waters prompted the quickening of his own thin blood, and filled Carver with an irrational optimism—despite the Baskers' attack. Spring always affected him this way. And yet he knew that the species of plankton scrambling through their brief lives around him were a fraction of the armies which had inhabited the oceans before the Impact.

Carver's optimism dissolved as rapidly as it had coalesced, and exhaustion seemed to congeal around him, like the touch of a premature winter. His empty stomach was an unending ache inside him, and his muscles—overextended, depleted—shivered as he forced his arms and legs to keep moving. But he knew better than to try to slow Hunter, to call for a rest. Exhausted, battered as they were, they had to go on to the lip of the Shelf—to hunt, to gather food; or they would surely die.

Everyone knew the story of the world. True Humans were born with it in their heads.

Once only a fraction of the oceans had been permanently covered with ice. And in some places the oceans had never frozen over at all . . . .

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Now, things were different. The Earth, thrown onto a wide ellipse by the Impact, swung close to the sun for only a couple of months each year. Most of the oceans stayed frozen, to their cores, all year round; only in the Shelf regions, the thin ribbons of shallow water around the continents, was there any thawing.

Any room for life.

The food chains had been devastated. Even the plankton had to be modified to enable them to endure the ice—remade by the last humans on dry land, working desperately as the air snowed around them.

At last the humans themselves had returned their own children to the oceans, the last habitable places on Earth.

They had populated the seas with animals and fish, all modified to withstand the winters. But none had survived. There were nothing but human variants left in the oceans now.

Plankton, and human variants.

And the humans had turned on each other.

"Down!"

Hunter's hiss startled him from his reverie.

People settled against the sea floor, letting bottom mud silt around their bodies. Children slid through the mud, squirming close to the adults.

From the corner of his eye Carver saw Lyra shadow their motions, settling to the mud a few hundred yards behind them—pretty, ineffectual, a sexless, childlike hermaphrodite.

Carver peered ahead through the dispersing mud cloud—and saw why Hunter had called a halt. An Angler swam toward them. It was a bloated, mud-orange ball; its limbs were stubs, with hands and feet webbed over and extended into fins. Its lantern glowing sharply on the rod of bone growing out of its skull, and wide nostrils filtered the silty water, Basker-style.

The Angler paused in its waddling path. It dipped forward, its huge mouth closing around some floating fragment of food. A mass in its stomach moved, some bony protuberance bulging across the Angler's distended belly. The stomach contents looked like a child within a womb; perhaps that prey was still alive, Carver speculated.

The Angler's neck barely existed; its massive, distorted face merged smoothly into the sleek mass of its body, and thin tufts of hair clung to its stretched scalp. This was a male, Carver saw; a small penis nestled in a sprouting of coarse hair beneath the distended belly. Its flesh was thin, still etiolated by long months in a chamber of ice—but the flesh was stretched thin over its stomach.

Through its huge, hinged jaw the Angler could swallow more than its

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own mass. This creature had already fed, and now it was almost lazing through the shallows, complacent, sleepy, patiently digesting its first meal of the year.

The Anglers lived in the deep, cold, barren waters beyond the Shelf. There was no light down there—no plankton, the only food the silty detritus of the Shelf communities. In the brief spring the Anglers swarmed upward, over the lip, to feed on the blooming life of the shallows.

And on the Shelf, True Humans awaited them.

Hunter lifted from the mud, slowly, stealthily. Carver marveled at his wife's economy of movement; her webbed feet seemed almost motionless and she raised barely a handful of mud from the floor. She held her spear before her—a spear still stained with the blood of Angels, Carver saw—and with her free hand she made a circling motion.

Carver and another man—a burly fellow called Healer-of-Wounds—lifted from the mud, trying to copy Hunter's silent glide through the water. Carver worked his way around to the left of the Angler and Healer took the right.

In moments they were in position, the two men and Hunter at three corners of a triangle around the oblivious, sleepy fish-man. Carver held his breath, the intensity of the hunt quickening his pulse.

Sunlight glimmered through the ice above them, illuminating the still, regular tableau.

The fish-man stirred. Hunter raised her right hand.

Carver and Healer burst toward the Angler. They roared and thrashed at the water, exploding with noise and motion.

The fish-man tipped up in the water, its bony light-rod quivering. Its startlingly human eyes seemed to move separately, fixing on the men.

Then it turned and, the flukes of its leg-fins beating so fast they blurred, it hurtled away from the men—

—and straight toward Hunter's spear-point.

Carver watched his wife raise the spear and ram it into the Angler's head, between its eyes. The Angler cried out, its voice deep, faintly human. The momentum of the fish-man caused it to plunge on, thrashing, carrying Hunter; but she'd been prepared for this and she clung onto her spear grimly, using her mass to lever it back and forth inside the Angler's head.

Blood and brain, pale grey, littered the water in a cloud around the struggling fish-man.

Now the other True Humans erupted from their shallow nests of mud and closed on the Angler. They tore at its pulsing flanks with knives, spears, hands and teeth. By the time Carver reached the group, the fish-man had been reduced to a bloodied pulp, barely recognizable, its flesh

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hanging loose in sheets over its ribs, its four distorted limbs dangling in the water.

At last it was stilled. The huge carcass, lifeless, settled to the bottom, followed by its attendant cloud of True Humans.

Carver ground tough flesh between his teeth as quickly as he could, forcing the food into his empty stomach. Save for traces of krill he'd swallowed during the journey, it was the first food he'd taken since last summer. It tasted *wonderful.*

Healer-of-Wounds climbed into the opened-up carcass. He pushed his feet against the Angler's white-gleaming spine and grasped its ribs; shreds of flesh slithered between his broad fingers. Healer pulled, hard, the huge muscles of his shoulders working; slowly he prised open the fish-man's chest. Organs—pale, swollen—tumbled out of the opened body cavity. A dozen hands descended on the stomach, pulling apart its soft walls with ease.

A body slithered out of the stomach. The flesh was eroded, gouged away by digestive acids.

At first Carver thought it was a True Human. But the shape of the skull, what was left of a huge mouth, were distinctive. This was a Basker—a young adult, judging by its size and weight.

The children descended on the Basker, dragging away loose bits of flesh, chewing on the salty, acid-softened goodies. Carver watched them indulgently, pleased they had found something to distract them from the horror of the Baskers' attack.

"Carver."

It was Hunter's voice, from somewhere away from the feeding group. He drifted away from the carcass. Growing complacent himself now his stomach was filling, he hadn't noticed she'd gone.

Hunter was close to the bottom, a few yards away—*and she had the Angel, Lyra.*

Carver hurried to them, his heart racing.

Hunter waited for him, her face set. One broad hand was wrapped around the wrist of the Angel—gently, Carver saw, but firmly—and in the other hand she held a scrap of Angler-meat.

Lyra squirmed, her pretty, glowing face crumpled with fear; she was trying to sing, but her song was fragmented, discordant.

Hunter faced Carver. "Saw her follow."

Carver was aware of his hands working, pulling at each other. "Let go. Harmless. Let go . . . ."

"Not harmless. Worked for Baskers."

But she didn't know what she was doing, Carver wanted to cry. *And—oh—and she was beautiful!*

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All the Angels, with their grace and song, were beautiful, he thought—the only source of beauty in a grim, dying world.

"They help us," he said desperately. "Against Baskers. Next spring."

Hunter was still shaking her head. "Not harmless. Never harmless again. *Never.*" She held the bit of meat out to Carver. He took it uncertainly; it was slick and warm in his palm. "Give. Feed her."

At first Carver couldn't understand. He held the meat out to the Angel; Lyra, her face lightening, reached for it eagerly.

Then—with shocking suddenness—he saw it. He snatched the meat back, ignoring Lyra's disappointment. He faced Hunter, appalled. "*No.* She not understand. *No.*"

Hunter reached out and took his arm, just as she held the Angel; she flexed her shoulders and dragged Carver and the Angel together, until they were face to face. "She like you. She *trust* you. You give her food. She take to her friends. Feed them all."

Carver looked into the vapid, pretty, trusting eyes of the Angel—and then into the eyes of his wife. Hunter's face was harder than the rock of the sea bottom, harder than midwinter ice. He saw determination there—a bleak, hard determination *that the species must survive,* at all costs—a determination that had once made humans, trapped on a freezing world, rebuild the very bodies of their children.

Before that will, beauty and music had no power. Carver had no power.

Carver faced the Angel and—slowly, fighting it all the way—he held out the meat to her.

The Angel's soft mouth closed around the meat. She chewed delicately, then swallowed, smiling at him trustingly; he could see the pale mass of meat pass down through her throat toward his stomach.

No pre-Impact human could have survived a single winter on the new Earth; the first freeze would have burst open the human's cell walls.

When people—True Humans and their distant cousins—had returned to the all-but-frozen seas, different groups had adopted different strategies to survive the long months of ice-entombment. The strategies were new to humankind, but had been exploited by animals and larvae in Earth's polar regions as long as life had existed on Earth.

In the bodies of True Humans, ice crystals formed—but in the spaces *between* cells, not *inside* the cells. Baskers, and their close relatives the Anglers, allowed their bodies to dehydrate before the winter entombed them. Where there was no water, no ice could form.

Angels were different. The blood of an Angel was a natural cryoprotectant—an alcohol-based antifreeze. So Angels didn't freeze at all; they supercooled, their blood remaining liquid below freezing point.

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But Angels had to fast, before the winter came. It was *very, very* important that the blood of an Angel was as pure as it could be before the freezing started . . . .

Carver knew all this, as he knew his own name, how to swim; True Humans were born with an understanding of the world around them.

And they were born knowing how to destroy Angels.

All through the summer, the Angel Lyra was allowed to stay with the little band of True Humans as they foraged at the lip of the Shelf. And Carver fed her constantly. He watched that delicate mouth close around the delicious morsels—bits of liver, kidney, heart-veins still warm and thick with blood; Lyra's pretty eyes were empty, even as she fed.

Suddenly autumn was on them. The waters, which had glowed with new life only weeks before, turned cloudy and stale as the diatoms, worms and other small animals began to die. The ice over the world thickened perceptibly, turning the Shelf into a place of shadows and murky gloom; deep, chill currents flowed up over the lip, buffeting the True Humans and making them huddle together against the cold.

Lyra—sleek, almost fat—seemed aware of the impending winter. She spent long hours away from the Humans now—Carver knew she must be with her own kind, perhaps mating (Angels were hermaphroditic, and mixed their fluids by kissing)—but she always returned.

When Carver brought her food now, she closed her pretty mouth and tried to pull away. But he gave her the most tender pieces of offal—he even chewed some of the pieces for her, to soften the meat and enhance the flavor.

She could not resist. She smiled at him and swallowed the wonderful, moist morsels.

And, as Lyra sang for him, Carver held out more meat.

Long splinters of ice reached down from the thickening surface crust.

The True Humans swam to a place far across the Shelf—far from the breeding ground of the Baskers who had attacked them. The children turned dull, lethargic, the fluids of their bodies slowing; one by one they gathered their knees to their chests, tucked their arms around their thighs, and closed their eyes.

The tiny bodies drifted to the surface, like bubbles, lodging in the ice.

Cold, his joints stiff, the blood like mud in his veins, Carver faced Lyra for the last time. She looked unnaturally fat—Angels in autumn should be like ghosts, barely more than glassy skin stretched over bone—and she seemed aware of it; her face was creased with unfocused concern.

But when he held out the food bag to her—when the stench of chewed,

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ripe offal reached her nostrils—she grabbed it with joy, all thoughts of the future driven from her small mind.

Above the thickened ice-crust, the air started to snow.

When he awoke, Hunter was waiting for him. She held out a sack of stored food. She grinned. "See. Safe. No Baskers. No Angels."

Carver pushed his way out of the ice, eager to be free of winter's dulling grip. He snatched the bag from Hunter and dragged a slab of foul, rotting Basker-flesh from it; he crammed it into his mouth, chewing impatiently.

The water was chill, barren, the surface ice still a thick crust.

He swam off, across the Shelf, toward the Angels' breeding ground. He didn't look back. He ignored his companions, the other True Humans. But he was aware that Hunter stayed close to him, her spear in her hand.

They passed a shoal of Baskers, most of them still fixed in the ice. One, conscious, watched the True Humans approach with dull eyes and slack jaw, and swam off with thrusts of its huge-boned, winter-wasted legs.

An Angel came drifting down from the frozen sky—stiff, limbs held rigid.

Carver hurried to her.

Gently, with stiff, trembling hands, he took her shoulders and spun her around. Long, pale hair lay plastered over the Angel's face and back, and her flesh shone with the light of the approaching Sun.

There was no awareness in that small mouth, those eyes; no blood moved beneath his hands. Her face was frosted over, crystallized; planes of ice dissected the thin body.

It wasn't Lyra.

Hunter reached past him and poked at the Angel with her spear. A frozen limb shattered and fell away; from a frozen vein, crystals of Angel blood trickled into the water, sparkling.

Supercooled fluids were unstable. They could precipitate instantly around any nucleating particles—like a fragment of food.

Carver studied the segmented torso. As the freezing had spread—cutting through this thin body in great sheets, as the Angel lay in her cave of ice, alone and helpless—what agony she must have endured!

Hunter grunted. "Good. One less. Now we do again, and again, until no more Angels. And we have kids. Grow strong. And then," she ran a fingertip along her spear, "and then we seek the Baskers."

Carver stumbled away from her, away from the mist of frozen Angel blood, in search of Lyra. ●

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Ray Vukcevich

THE PERFECT GIFT

Ray Vukcevich is a research assistant for the Institute of Cognitive and Decision Sciences at the University of Oregon. His unusual Christmas story about "The Perfect Gift" is his second tale for *Asimov's*. Mr. Vukcevich's other publications include stories in *F&SF, Pulphouse,* and *Aboriginal SF*. He is currently at work on a novel.

The children had stuffed their ragged clothes with newspaper against the snow that Christmas Eve. Tim still had on his dirty Dodgers cap, and you could see Amy's mousy hair through the holes in her summer scarf. They huddled together on the curb in the moonlight, waiting for Santa, blowing into their hands, rubbing one another's shoulders, listening to their chattering teeth, listening to their rumbling bellies.

"Me, I want cake," Amy said.

"I want a burger," Tim said. "I want some fries and a Coke and maybe one of those one-man pies."

"Cake," Amy said. "Chocolate cake."

Soon headlights appeared, moving slowly down the dark street. The children could hear the tires in the oily slush of melted snow.

"Get ready to run," Tim said. "In case it's not him." He took her hand and they got to their feet.

The big white limo with the two red you-better-watch-out eyes on the door pulled up beside them, and Santa climbed out of the back seat.

"Merry Christmas!" His voice boomed and echoed in the carcasses of the burnt-out buildings lining the street. He dragged his big sack out on the sidewalk. "I'll bet you two have been good this year," he said. "Is that true?"

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"Yes!" the children cried.

Santa gave them a stern look, but they knew he didn't mean it. "Maybe I should check my book."

"No!"

"You're right. No need to look. I remember you two." The jolly old gentleman dug into his big red sack of Christmas goodies. "Let me see. Let me see." He finally found what he wanted and straightened up again. "Here you go, young man." He handed Tim a big card, maybe four or five inches high and eight or so long. "And one for you, Missy."

Tim looked down at his card. It was smooth and slippery. Glossy. There was a picture of several cooked birds surrounded by greenery on a white plate. There was a border of little blue flowers all around the card. Along the top were the words GREAT RECIPES OF THE WORLD. There were instructions. The ingredients were in bold letters. A snowflake fell onto the card and melted, but the card was so slick, the snowflake couldn't wet it. What Tim liked best about the card was that it was new; it had no sad history. Tim looked at Amy, then they both looked back up at Santa.

"I can see you're wondering," Santa said. "It's like this." He put his hand on Tim's shoulder. "If you give a man food, he can eat for a day, but if you teach him to cook, well, dot dot dot!"

"Dot dot dot?" Tim asked.

"Yes," Santa said with a bit of an edge to his voice. "Dot dot dot!"

Tim and Amy knew just how to talk to grownups. "Thank you, Santa," they said together.

Santa treated them to a few ho ho hos and his bowl full of jelly routine, then climbed back into his car. The limo sloshed on down the street.

When the car disappeared, Tim and Amy settled back down onto the cold curb.

"What'd you get?" Tim asked.

"Casserole of Octopus," Amy said. "Looks squishy. What about you?"

"Braised Squabs."

"What's a squab?"

"I don't know. Looks like little chickens in the picture."

"Timmy?"

"Yeah?"

"Wanna trade?"

Tim pretended to think about it for a moment, and it wasn't all pretend, then he put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her in close. "Anything for you, kiddo," he said. "Merry Christmas!" ●

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Susan Casper

UP THE RAINBOW

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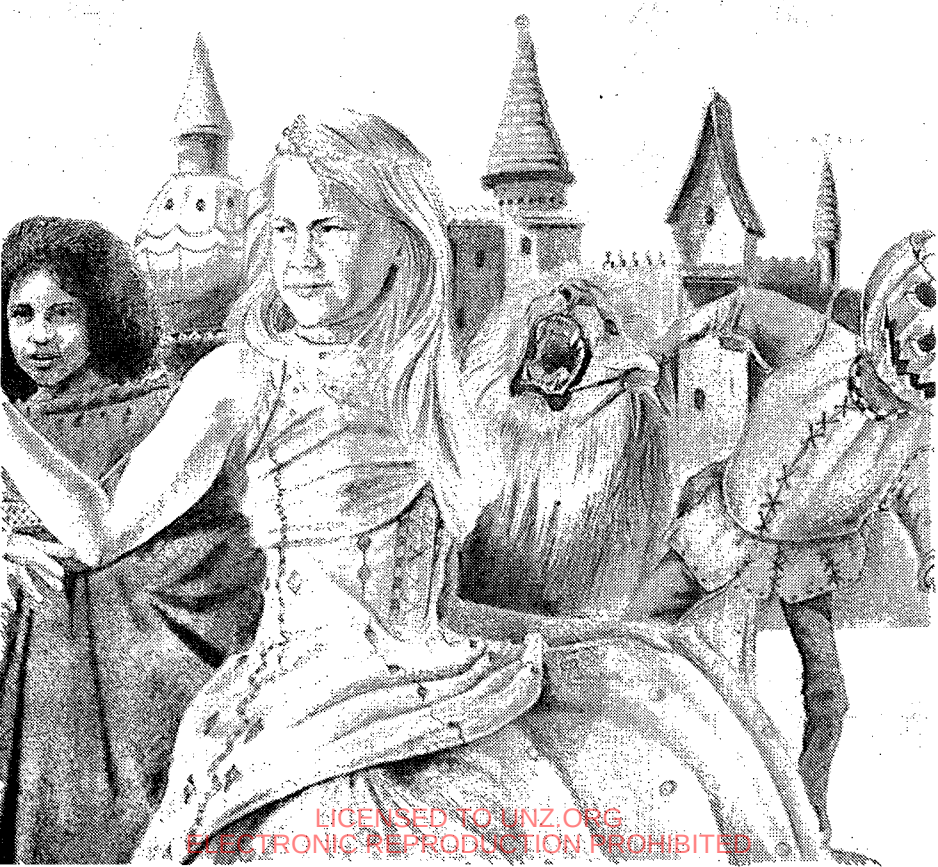
Susan Casper recently helped judge the 1993 James Tiptree, Jr., Award for Best Gender Bending Fiction. With Gardner Dozois, she co-edited the anthology *Ripper!*, and her publications include stories in *Omni, Playboy, Aladdin, Sherlock Holmes in Orbit,* and *Dinosaur Fantastic.* Ms. Casper's delightful fantasy about travails and travels "Up the Rainbow" is her third tale for *Asimov's.*

Illustrations by Steve Cavallo



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Dorothy was dead at the age of ninety-three, and there was almost no one left to notice. The graveyard air was gray and chill like the Kansas plains. Mr. Baum had once told her that she stood out amidst the rubble of her ruined house like a flower in a garden of weeds. And to think, if the writer had not ridden by in his motor-car, had not seen her playing amidst the debris of the family's house, those wonderful Oz books might never have been written.

Gale Osterman smiled down at the coffin, a line of tears staining her cheeks. "I'll miss you, Grandma," she said softly, tossing her clod of earth on the burnished lid.

Grandma had not been her only loss that year. She'd buried her marriage in January, and her job had gone by the wayside when she'd come back two months ago to take care of the ailing old woman. She had been bitter about the former, mostly because he'd already found someone else, leaving the little black-and-white cat as her only companion, but now it seemed unimportant, somehow. A hand touched her shoulder, squeezed and withdrew, then another. She nodded at her well-wishers without looking up at their faces, then turned and walked away from the grave.

At least she wouldn't have to worry about money for a while. Dorothy had left her well provided for. She pulled her ancient, blue Grand Am out of the gravel lot and drove through the dreary roads to her grandmother's house. Her house now. The very farmhouse L. Frank Baum had written about, though it didn't look much the same any more. Not the tornado house. That had been completely destroyed. Gale supposed that if it hadn't been, Mr. Baum would never have stopped to ask Dorothy if there was anything he could do to help. Dorothy always said that she never knew he was going to use her for a character until he sent her the first of the books. Gale suspected that during Dorothy's lonely childhood, those books had become more real to her than her own boring existence. Later, in the confusion of age, she even spoke of them as if they were real, laughing about some exploit of the Hungry Tiger's, or worrying about the Scarecrow's brains. That last night, Gale had found her on the stairs, looking vacant and confused. "I've got to get to Ozma," she told Gale. "Ozma can *help* me."

"Come on, Grandma. Let's get you back to bed," Gale said, putting her arm around the old woman's shoulders and leading her back to her room.

"You're right," Dorothy said as Gale tucked the covers around her. "My mind must be going." The words had wrenched Gale's heart. She'd wanted to offer some words of reassurance, but what was there to say? Then, a moment later, Dorothy was prattling incoherently again. "We had such fun!" Dorothy said, talking of creatures Gale couldn't even remember reading about. "I just wanted to say good-bye."

Gale'd kissed her. "I'll get you some soup," she'd said. By the time she came back to the room, Dorothy was gone.

This was the house Dorothy's Uncle Henry had built after the storm. It was the only one on its block, and stood well back from the street, surrounded by weed-choked grounds. The barn and outbuildings, as well

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as much of the land, long since sold to developers as the city of Wichita spread out to encroach the area. A prime block of suburban land would be worth a fair amount, if Gale was willing to let it go. But then they would tear the house down. Within weeks the pale, characterless sea of tract housing would flow in to cover the last remaining island in this ocean of suburbia.

Inside, the house was as modern as the rest of them. The plumbing was old, but good copper pipes, and the fixtures and wiring had been redone only a few years ago. She flicked the switch, watching the room blaze into brightness. Some of the neighbors must have dropped by while she was at the funeral. A neatly banked fire burned in the hearth. Plates and Tupperware containers loaded with food, and neatly stacked on the dining room table, were visible through the graceful, columned arch. Sweet of them. The cat was on the table, busily trying to get at the meat. Absently, Gale picked her up and began to stroke her fur. She was such a delicate, dainty little creature that Gale almost thought of her as a little girl. "A lady does not take food until she's been invited," Gale said to her. Spooky settled down and began to purr. Though Gale could feel a knot of grief like lead in her stomach, she would rather have the comfort of one cat who loved her than the cold comfort of semi-strangers, no matter how well-intentioned. The large stack of condolence cards piled on an end table was more than enough to let her know that Grandma had been loved. It was *Gale* who was all alone in the world. She looked at the portrait of Dorothy hanging over the mantel. A portrait that Gale, herself, could have sat for. The same short brown hair, straight rather than curly, the rounded cheeks that tended toward roses, a little snub nose, and a thin-lipped smile. Gale was taller than Dorothy, but that was about the only difference, excepting age and a certain brightness that Gale was painfully aware she lacked. When her parents had died, when Jesse left, there had always been Grandma. Now she was gone. Gale had never felt quite so alone before. More for herself than for Dorothy, she cried herself into a fitful sleep.

Gale was startled out of sleep by the telephone. Her own phone made a chirping noise, and she found it hard to reacclimate herself to the lusty bawl of Dorothy's antique instrument.

"Hello," she said into the receiver, her voice still thick with sleep and tears.

"Gale?" the voice on the other end asked, hesitantly. It was Jesse. "I hope you don't mind my calling. I just heard about your grandmother, and I wanted to tell you how sorry I am."

Gale took a deep breath and let it out slowly, biting back the bitter retort that jumped immediately to mind. She didn't love him any more. She hadn't loved him for a long time. But she missed the fact of him, the connectedness, the company. She'd known for ages that her marriage was going to end, but it was supposed to happen when *she* was ready. Still, there was no point in fighting. They'd shared a lot together. "Thank you," she answered eventually. "I know you loved her too."

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"It would have been hard not to. She was pretty terrific. Look how she made me feel right at home when I half expected her to shut the door in my face," he said.

"You? I was surprised she ever let me see you again, the way you showed up at the door. Barefoot, bell-bottoms, hair down to your waist. She sure surprised me, though. She told me you seemed like a nice young man, and she wanted to keep you around until she could figure a way to steal your hair," Gale laughed. "She liked you a lot."

"And here I thought she blamed me for getting you arrested," he said.

"I told you she didn't. She said it was important, what we were doing. That people needed to stand up to the system. Besides, I think she knew we were having fun." Gale paused. "It was fun, wasn't it?"

Jesse laughed. "Remember the time we picketed Sterling Labs?"

"I know they *said* they weren't making weapons, but none of us believed them. It wasn't just me. I think I learned the words to every protest song that had ever been written," Gale said. "We *did* make a difference, though, didn't we? A little one, anyway. We were so committed then. What happened to us?"

"We should have been committed, you mean!" he laughed, then his voice became serious. "Like Wendy, we got too old. One day you look around and realize that you aren't gaining very much ground, and what's more, you've got an awful lot to lose. It's the young people with nothing to lose who can afford to butt their heads against a stone wall in the hopes it will give an inch."

"Jesse," she said softly, after a short pause. "I really do wish you the best in your new marriage."

"Thanks, Gale. Believe it or not, that means a lot to me, and to Barbara, too."

She placed the phone in its cradle, and leaned back on the sofa, swathed in a blanket of bittersweet memories. What fun they used to have! Sit-ins at the Student Union, cheered on by the tinny voices of Ochs and Collins blaring through the campus loudspeakers. Rallies at Washington Square. Falling asleep by the Washington Monument during an anti-war concert, and waking to find the whole place surrounded by cops in full riot gear, their guns aimed into the crowd, while swarms of helicopters buzzed angrily overhead like a flock of carnivorous birds. But then, they had been so in love that even the teargassings and the nights in jail seemed part of a wonderful dream. Or, maybe she had it backward. Ending the war had been so *important* to them. How much of their feeling for each other was wrapped up in that larger passion? Had their love only lasted while the war raged on and there were battles left to fight? If so, they'd spent the last fifteen years or so coming down from an enormous high. At this point, she couldn't remember. She felt the cat rub against her ankle, and absently scratched Spooky on the head.

"Feelings are such funny things, Spooky," she told the cat. "I wish I could still feel that way about *anything*. But then, maybe Jesse was right. Maybe it was just a matter of having nothing to lose." Gale thought

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about that for a moment. There were few people with less to lose than Gale Osterman—only she no longer had any causes. The more she thought about it, the more she came to realize that there was nothing out there that she cared enough about to fight for. Well, she was going to have to do something. She certainly couldn't spend the rest of her life just sitting here. Perhaps there weren't any causes left, but there was still the estate to be taken care of. An inventory would be needed for the tax men. There would be clothing to be boxed and given to charity, and she would have to decide what to sell and what to keep. "No time like the present," she said, to no one in particular.

Taking time to change into jeans, a sweater, and comfortable sandals so old and broken in that she'd no longer dare to wear them outside, she headed up the graceful stairway to Dorothy's room, and opened the closet door. A renewed bout of tears told her that she wasn't yet ready for that one. The clothes would be given away, the jewelry sorted through, and the personal mementos. Gale wasn't quite sure how much she wanted to keep, nor even where she would keep it all, if she decided to sell the house. She switched on the portable television. The news was on. A shot of kids waving signs. SAVE THE TALL GRASS PRAIRIE! one sign read. "We don't need some trailer park squatting on our national resources," a young woman said. Gale snapped the TV off, not sure why it made her angry. "They're banging their heads against a stone wall. A pity, too, 'cause they're right." She said to the cat, who looked up at Gale with her head cocked to the side as if she were trying to understand. "Shit! Why can't they leave the lousy prairie alone. It's not as if there's so much of it left any more. Why, if I were ten years younger, I'd be right out there with them, trying to keep those damned parasites from ruining what little we have left!" She sat on the edge of the bed. No causes? But once her initial bout of anger passed, she just couldn't summon up any enthusiasm. "I guess I'm just too old to enjoy sitting in the cold grass yelling at the top of my lungs," she said. She picked up the cat and ruffled her fur. "You're such a lady, Spooky. I almost feel guilty cursing around you."

She got up and looked around anxiously. This was no time to sit. She had to do *something*. Well, if she couldn't handle the bedroom yet, she'd start in the attic, or in that little room upstairs. Things would be less immediate there. Besides, there was a bit of mystery about that little room. Dorothy had never told her to keep out, but it *was* kept locked. Gale had found the key and crept up there once or twice, but she'd never found anything interesting enough to keep her locked away from. Perhaps now, now that the room was hers, she could discover its secret.

The music box on the bedroom bureau let out a chorus of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," when Gale opened the lid. A strange conceit that, since Dorothy hadn't liked the movie very much. It wasn't enough like the books, and Judy Garland was much too old, the cowardly lion too cute, and the wizard too much of a fool. Still, they watched it together every Easter, and every Easter she said the same thing. "If that's me,

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then I should be able to sing like that!" and she'd croak out a chorus of one song or another, unable, as always, to carry a tune.

Gale found the key to the upstairs room in a small white envelope inside the box, and silenced the mawkish tune with a slam of the lid.

The room was a mess, dust and cobwebs everywhere. It had been a long time since Dorothy had done any cleaning, and Gale hadn't been in the room for twenty years or more. Obviously this had been Dorothy's bedroom when she was small. The faded wallpaper showed traces of the cheerful roses that had once adorned the walls, and the bed and vanity each had a frilly pink curtain to cover its base that matched the one in the window. Above the vanity, a dust-streaked mirror showed recent fingerprints. There was a bureau off to the side, a grimy doily on its top making a nest for bottles that had once contained some lavender perfume and something called floral bouquet. She sat on the edge of the bed and opened a bottom drawer. Immediately, Spooky was there, trying to jump inside. "Cut that out!" she yelled, but the cat was being obstinate, so Gale picked her up and held her on her lap. "Now listen, little girl. I've had enough aggravation for one day. I've got to get this work done, and I'm never gonna finish it if you keep getting in my way." Ignoring her, the cat began kneading on her sweater. Gale sighed. She couldn't bend over far enough to take things out of the drawer with the cat in her lap, but she hated to disturb her. With her foot, she nudged the lower drawer shut and opened the one in easy reach.

Unlike the rest of the room, the drawer was surprisingly clean. There was no evidence of dust or bugs. It was almost as if someone had come in daily and just cleaned the inside of the drawer. The only thing inside was a small piece of stone. An inch and a half long, about the size of a hotel soap, with rounded corners. It was a flat, greenish-gray, but faceted around the edges like a gemstone, and in the center was a raised oval containing the word OZ. Something about it had the feeling of an earlier part of the century. It was sweet to think of Grandma saving mementos from her all too brief moment in the sun. It fit very comfortably in the palm of her hand, and she studied it carefully. "Just look at this, Spooky. You live with someone all your life and you *think* you know them and . . ."

Suddenly the bed gave way beneath her, but rather than landing on the soft familiar mattress, something hard and lumpy smacked her on the back. She did not feel injured, except for the scratch that Spooky made jumping hurriedly from her arms, but something was wrong. Instead of flat white ceiling above her, there was bright blue sky, puffed with clouds. Nor was she surrounded by the debris of her house as she might have expected. It was all very confusing. Oh, there were houses around her, but they lined up neatly on either side. No houses like these had ever been built in the Kansas suburbs. For one thing, they were dome-shaped, like very large outdoor ovens. Much smaller than the houses she was used to, they were made of some unusual material, too. All were painted a bright green, with very neat shutters and doors of a

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deep emerald hue. Before her, marble steps led up to what must surely be a palace. She wasn't certain just why she thought that, since at home she might have said library or museum, but palace it was, without any doubt. She felt her head with one hand, checking for lumps or sore spots. There weren't any. Finally her eyes found the one familiar thing in the whole scene, and she scooped the cat up into her arms.

"Spooky," she said, rubbing her under her chin and grasping at the phrase she always used in puzzling situations, "I don't think we're in Kansas any more."

"No shit, Sherlock!" the cat replied.

"Did you . . . say something?" Gale asked, dropping the cat in surprise.

"Ouch, that hurt," the cat said.

"You *did* speak. I heard you," Gale said.

"Nah! You just hit your head, and you're having hallucinations." Spooky laughed as Gale felt her head again. "Okay, don't be silly," Spooky said. "Of course I spoke. Can't you tell the difference between dreams and reality? I always can."

"Yes, that is, I usually think I can, but if I'm awake, what's going on? What is this place?"

"Hey, I just learned how to talk. I haven't had time to read the encyclopedia! It's pretty strange for me, too. Just go with the flow." And with those words, Spooky sat down and began to lick her foot.

Gale looked at the stone still tightly gripped in her hand. Oz? No, it couldn't be. Oz wasn't real. Her grandmother had told her so, and she should know if anyone did. Besides, it didn't look much like the illustrations. Still, where else could she be?

Just then a fanfare sounded. The palace doors opened wide, and a strange troupe came marching out. There was a girl with green hair, and a boy all dressed in blue with a tall, pointed hat on his head. Some strange fellow seemed to be wearing a bag on his head, and another appeared to be wearing, of all things, a pumpkin. But when a lion and a tiger broke free from either side of the group and came bounding down the steps toward her, Gale took a large step backward and wound up, once again, lying on her back in the cobblestone road. She squeezed her eyes shut and waited to be devoured.

"Why, you aren't Dorothy at all," someone said.

Gale opened one eye just a crack, then suddenly both eyes sprang open, and in spite of all the oddities around her, she found herself smiling. What a pretty little girl it was standing before her. A bright, apple-cheeked child who might have stepped right out of an N.C. Wyeth illustration. Her eyes were bright green and her long golden hair hung down her back in unbridled curls. She looked to be about twelve years old, at Gale's best guess, and still carried a chunky padding that wasn't quite fat. But it was her outfit that seemed the most incongruous. Like a child dressed up for some Edwardian costume ball, she wore a long, flowing dress of indeterminate color. Around her head was a slender gold circlet, almost the same shade as her hair, but this was bedecked with faceted

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gems, topaz, amethyst, sapphire, emerald, ruby. Gale was no expert, but they certainly *looked* real, as did the ones in the slender scepter in the girl's hand. Was the girl royalty, or merely playing a game? Either way, Gale decided to humor her.

"Your majesty," Gale said, getting to her feet, trying hard to keep the note of amusement out of her voice.

"I am Ozma," the child said formally, "but the real question is, who are you?"

Ozma? So this *was* Oz. Whether it was real or a delusion, she'd have to wait and see. "My name is Gale Osterman. I know this is probably going to sound silly, but I honestly have no idea where I am or how I got here."

"You are in the Emerald City of Oz. As to how you got here, *I* brought you." The girl drew herself up and her tone grew imperious. "There has surely been some mistake, for I thought you were my friend Dorothy Gale from Kansas. And now I must ask you how you came to be sitting in her bedroom and using the stone I gave her? Once I am satisfied with your answers, I will gladly return you to whence you came."

Gale's eyes filled with tears. Could this really be true? All the stories Mr. Baum had written, was he really only reporting on Grandma's actual *life?* But Grandma had never said anything to lead her to believe . . . Gale thought about it for a moment. Would she be able to tell anyone? *Would* anyone believe her? No! Even she didn't quite believe it yet, and it was staring her right in the face. She really thought that she must be dreaming. Still, it didn't feel like a dream. The air was cool against her cheek, and gently perfumed with some strange flowery scent she'd never smelled before. The scratch Spooky had given her arm still stung like a son-of-a-bitch, though the blood had clotted over already.

"I'm waiting for an answer," Ozma said, a note of suspicion creeping into her voice. Behind her the man with the bag on his face was looking more and more like an animated scarecrow, and surely the pumpkin-headed thing with its twiggy arms and legs had never been a man.

"Dorothy Gale was my grandmother," Gale said at last.

"Was?" Ozma said, and Gale explained. Ozma paled and her eyes filled with tears, as did those of the lion and tiger, the girl with green hair, and everyone else that Gale could see. Even the scarecrow and the pumpkin, with their bright, fixed smiles, looked somehow shaken by the news.

"Come," Ozma said softly. "Let us go into the palace where you can tell me all about this before you leave." She led Gale up the marble steps and through two beautifully crafted doors studded with emeralds. A hodgepodge of chairs were being set up in the hall even as they arrived, and, as they selected two seats right next to each other, an elaborate tea tray was wheeled into the room. "I hope you will forgive me for serving the tea out here. I know that it is not so comfortable as the dining hall, but The Gump will certainly want to hear what you have to say." Ozma pointed to a head mounted on the wall above the hearth, and the head nodded in reply.

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Gale began her narrative, and, while she spoke, a cup of tea and a plate of cakes were provided by the girl with green hair, who was now wearing the uniform of a kitchen maid. "I suppose she was trying to get back here at the end. Oh, if she'd only told me. If I'd only known that you were real. Why didn't she ever say anything?" Gale said, more to herself than to the assembled crowd.

"She told *me*," Spooky said with a sniff, as she finished off the last of the big bowl of milk given to her. "I tried to tell you. I tried and tried, but would you ever listen?"

"Now, now, mind your manners," Ozma reprimanded the cat. Gale stiffened. What right did she have to sanction Spooky in that snotty tone? The cat had said nothing wrong. She started to say something, then decided that to do so would make her as rude as her hostess. She banked down her emotions and listened to Ozma speak.

"She *couldn't* tell you," Ozma said. "You see, after Mr. Baum wrote that book, so many wanted to come here. We couldn't have them all. It seemed that the only thing to do was pretend that Oz was a place he'd made up. We all agreed never to tell anyone. Dorothy promised to tell Mr. Baum all about her adventures here as long as he promised never to tell the truth."

"That part was *my* idea," said the Scarecrow. He pulled off his hat and pointed to his scarred and lumpy head. "It was easy for me to think of it, since I have the very fine brains that the Wizard has given me. Good brains are very important, don't you think?"

"And now that we've heard your story, I'm afraid that it's time to say good-bye," Ozma said.

"Wait! There are things I'd like to know, too," Gale said.

"What sort of things?" Ozma asked.

"Why, about Grandma, of course. What was it like here for her, and why did she leave?" Gale asked.

"Princess Dorothy was well loved here in Oz. All of my subjects adored her and thought her quite beautiful. She was one of my very best friends. But you see, the people of Oz live under an enchantment. Once, long ago, a passing wizard put a spell on us. We do not grow old and die like other people. We thought that when someone from the outside came here to live, they would be under the spell as well, but that was not quite true. The spell seems to work only partially on people from the outside world. Princess Dorothy did not age as quickly as she would have in Kansas, but eventually she did grow older. Soon she came to an age where she wanted things that she could never have here. A husband, children."

Gale furrowed her brow. "But why couldn't she marry here? Was there no one here for her to marry?"

"Think," The Scarecrow said, pointing again to his well-stitched head. "Dorothy was going to get older, while no one from Oz ever would. If she married a man of twenty, someday she would be an old woman and he would still be twenty. If she had a baby, and I'm not sure folks around

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here *can* still have babies, no one seems to do it any more, but even if she could have a baby, it would be a baby all its days."

"Ugh," Gale said softly. "I can see where that might be a problem."

Ozma stood up. "And now I'm afraid that it really is time for you to go."

"Oh, do I really have to go? I'd love to stay for a little while. Can't I see a little more of this lovely land?" Gale asked.

"We've stopped allowing foreigners," Ozma said. "It never seems to work out very well."

"Forgive me for disagreeing, Ozma," Scarecrow chimed in, "but she is not a foreigner, she *belongs* here." He waved his arms with such fervor that wisps of straw flew out of his sleeve and scattered across the floor. He paused to look at it, and shrugged. "Dorothy always said I was the only person she knew who was constantly knocking the stuffing out of himself," he said to Gale, then turned once more to Ozma. "After all, you made Dorothy a Princess of Oz. If Gale is her granddaughter, doesn't that make her a princess too?"

"Scarecrow is right!" a flat mechanical voice boomed out. From somewhere behind her, a metal man clomped forward to stand before Ozma. Not the Tin Woodman, for tin was silver in color and this man was a deep, burnished gold. Gale thought about it for a moment, trying to remember the books she'd read so many years ago. Tik-Tok? Was that his name? He did not look much like the Neill illustrations as she recalled them, being more angular and much less cute, but then, neither did most of the others. Ozma looked somewhat older, the Scarecrow shorter, Jack Pumpkinhead almost scary, more like a creature from *Halloween IV* than a children's book character.

Tik-Tok continued to speak, discoursing at length about right of succession. "You were accepted as ruler because your father had been King before you. If Gale's grandmother was royalty, then she truly is a Princess of Oz."

"I must think about this. Oh, I wish the Wizard had never left us," Ozma said, looking more like a child than ever. Yet there was something strange about that, Gale realized, for despite her apparent age, this "child" was probably well over a hundred years old. "At least I can see no reasons why, as Princess Dorothy's offspring, you cannot be allowed to stay for a while. As to your royal status, I must consult with my advisors. In the meantime, you are welcome to use Dorothy's apartments."

Jellia Jamb, the green-haired girl, now in a different uniform, showed up almost immediately and led Gale to a suite of rooms. Not since touring the Royal Pavilion at Brighton had Gale seen such ostentation. The walls and ceiling were painted with scenes of the surrounding countryside, only the plants and animals were none that Gale recognized. The moldings and friezes were elaborately carved and gilded, the furniture heavy with large wooden claws for legs, each holding an emerald as big as her fist, and every piece covered in deep, green velvet. Flounces and ruffles

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adorned the edge of the bed, which was piled high with comforters and pillows, and every square inch of space on table and shelf was covered with ornaments, vases, pictures, and every sort of bric-a-brac. Mirrored closets lined a whole wall in one room, and there were several bulging armoires and bureaus. The carpets, walls, and furniture were all slightly different shades of green, likewise the wood, and, as a small nick in one piece seemed to show, that was its natural color. Gale wondered what sort of tree it had come from.

Once Gale was gone, Ozma led Tik-Tok and the Scarecrow into the meeting room. "Oh, I wish Glinda were here," Ozma said. "She would know what to do."

"I do not know what else you *can* do," Tik-Tok said. "The law of the land is clear."

"Yes, I'm sure you are correct," Ozma said. "Still, somehow I don't feel right about this. Are you sure she *is* Dorothy's granddaughter? Look at those horrid clothes she was wearing. I can't imagine Dorothy teaching her children to dress like men. Dorothy was always a lady. And her hair. And what kind of woman wears paint all over her face?"

"As to her clothes," said Tik-Tok, who was quite a reasonable creature, "I am sure that she was not expecting to come for a visit, or surely she would have been wearing something more suitable."

"My face is painted," the man of straw added, "and yet you do not think the less of me, I believe."

"Surely, my friends, you are right," Ozma said. "It is, I suppose, only the distressing news she brings that makes me so uncertain." She threw off her worried look, and smiled. "Well then, we must throw a party to welcome our newest princess to Oz. Scarecrow, would you please go and see what supplies are needed? We have not thrown a grand party for such a long time. I'm sure we are right out of everything."

"Princess, I would gladly do anything for you," the Scarecrow said, "but I'm afraid I cannot help you with this, as my eyes seem to have gotten damaged and I can hardly see anything at all."

"You have rubbed them off," Tik-Tok said sternly. "I know that you were sad to hear about Princess Dorothy, but I do not see why you dab at your eyes like that when you are unable to shed any tears. Princess, I will look in the pantry for you."

"Tik-Tok is right. You will need to see Jinjur to have your eyes re-painted. Do you think you'll be able to make the journey?" Ozma asked.

The straw man scratched his head. "I think it will be best if I have someone to accompany me. Do you think that Princess Gale would like to make the journey?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm sure she would love to go. Besides, that will leave the Saw-Horse free to fetch supplies. Then, while Gale is gone, I can have some dresses made for her as a surprise for her return." Ozma clapped her hands. "Yes, that is a wonderful idea."

* * *

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Spooky sat across from Gale on the velvet chair. "I like it here," she said, digging her claws into the soft cloth.

"You would," Gale replied. She reached out to stop the cat from scratching the furniture, then drew her hand back. "A cat who can talk should have better manners than that. When did you learn to talk, anyway?"

"I don't know. Just suddenly I could," Spooky pulled her claws out of the velvet and licked her shoulder coolly. "Something in the air here, I guess," she said when she was done. "I take it that you're not crazy about this place."

"I don't know. If I'd known I was coming, I probably would have been very excited, but there's something about this land—talking moose heads, walking scarecrows, a little girl princess who must be over a hundred years old—it all sounds great in a storybook, but actually *being* here? I guess I'm afraid I'll say the wrong thing, *do* the wrong thing. Maybe I'll feel more comfortable later. If we stay, that is. I'm not really sure that we should. We don't really fit in, you know. At least, I don't."

She was called to breakfast by Jellia Jamb. "Ozma asked me to apologize to you because we can't provide suitable clothing for you this morning. Had we known you were coming, we would have had something ready, but as you can see, all that we have are these old dresses of Dorothy's. You may wear one if you wish." And after giving a practiced curtsey, she threw open the doors to one of the large armoires.

Gale looked at the clothes. They certainly did not appear to be eighty years old. Except for the style, they might have been purchased yesterday. But the style told a story of its own. A few were the everyday sort of dresses that a child might have worn at the turn of the century, with puffed sleeves and rows of ruffles. The rest were the overly ornate costume type get-ups that Ozma had worn. Gale tried to picture her slacks-and-a-nice-blouse grandmother dressed in such things and could not. Even the gown she'd worn at Gale's wedding had been a simple, elegant affair.

"I'm afraid none of these will fit," Gale said, trying to sound sorrier than she felt.

"Then you will just have to wear the garments you came in until something more suitable can be made," the girl said. "Are you ready to eat yet?"

"Well, I would like a chance to wash up first," Gale said, "If you will show me where I can do so."

"Certainly," Jellia Jamb said. "The ewers were freshly filled yesterday," the girl said, pointing at two pitchers sitting in matching bowls. Gale was most embarrassed. She had spent the night wondering why they had provided so much water and not a single glass. "Or, if you feel the need for a more elaborate bath," the maid went on, opening yet another armoire revealing a lavish bathroom. "Please ring the bell when you're ready," she added, and with another polite curtsey, she withdrew.

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Gale was glad to see there was a toilet. Looking at this one she could see why people sometimes called them thrones. Still, there was no shower, and nothing she would think of as a tub, though she supposed the thing that looked like a swimming pool had been put there for just that purpose. Around it, four large fluffy towels were neatly laid out. "I could swim two or three laps in that thing," she said to Spooky.

"Why humans seem to find it necessary to get themselves wet all over, I have never understood," the cat replied.

The only other fixture in the room was a tiny dressing table with a large and graceful oval mirror and hideous ruffled curtains over the knee-hole. On the top were crystal trays with oddly shaped bottles of scent, and powder, and soaps, and cream of all sorts, but no make-up or hairspray or deodorant, nor any of the other things she associated with her morning ritual. It had been a long time since she'd last gone out to face the world without even a touch of lipstick to heighten her spirits, but there was no help for that now. Her own cosmetics, she was sadly aware, were sitting in a house in Kansas. She hadn't even brought her purse along.

Though washed, dressed, combed, and feeling very much better, she did not immediately ring for someone to take them to the dining hall, but sat on the bed and looked around the room. For once, it was feeling quite real to her. She really was here. Excitement began to well up in her. She let it grow.

"Oz!" she said, without a trace of disbelief. "We're in *Oz*, Spooky!"

"Yeah?" Spooky said. "So?"

"You don't understand," Gale said. "When I was a little girl, I wanted desperately to believe in Oz, but Dorothy was my grandmother, so I couldn't, because I knew the 'truth.' " She felt a twinge of anger at the unfairness of it all. Unfairness was the thing Gale hated most in all the world. She shrugged and let the feeling go. "And now, here I am!" She laughed, capturing the feeling of being a child again.

Breakfast was a lavish affair, with much more food than Gale was used to in the morning. There were five or six kinds of bread that ranged from soft, flaky rolls to a substantial, hard crusted loaf dotted with seeds. There were eggs, of course, courtesy of Billina's offspring. They steamed on silver salvers. There were baskets of fruit, some familiar and some odd and startlingly beautiful. There was a mountain of butter, surrounded by foothills of cheese, and lovely crystal jars of jam. A golden tray was covered with several kinds of smoked fish. There was no coffee, but there was tea, and milk, and three or four kinds of juice. Everything smelled wonderful and tasted even better.

Spooky was not given a seat at the table, but she did not miss out on the goodies. A plate, heaped high with all the same offerings, was placed in the corner for the cat to enjoy.

To Gale's right, the Hungry Tiger burbled on about how much he wanted a fat baby to eat, but he seemed quite contented by slices of

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bread smeared with marmalade. To her left, Jack Pumpkinhead did not eat at all, but he upheld his end of the conversation, and once she got past the oddity of talking to a jack-o-lantern on a body of sticks, he was rather pleasant company. All in all, it was quite a lovely meal, and she ate until her poor body could hold no more.

When breakfast was over, and the diners sat back, groaning, in their chairs, Ozma stood and rapped her goblet with a golden fork. "I would like to introduce you to the newest princess of Oz, Princess Gale!" she said, to the enthusiastic cheers of all.

Gale bowed her head to acknowledge them. "I'm a princess?" she said. "Cool!" So, it had been decided in her favor. She wondered just what royal status meant. Would she have to wear those awful dresses? Or, just maybe, she could bring Ozma a little way into the twentieth century. At least to the extent of teaching her the value of a good pair of jeans.

"There will be a party held in her honor one week from today," Ozma said when the noise died down. "I will send messages to all of Dorothy's old and dear friends to come and meet her granddaughter, and I would be most pleased if all of you would attend. That is all."

The guests rose as one, but before Gale could leave the room, the straw man asked her to wait, and when the others were finally gone, the child-princess took her hand and led her into another room.

This was far and away the most ornate room she'd seen so far, looking much like it had been stolen from Versailles. The arms of the dark green chairs were either gold or gilt, and the fabrics were brocade and velvet. The four walls were decorated, each with a scene representing a country in Oz, and, painted on the domed ceiling, was the royal palace itself. Hanging down from the steps of the palace was a golden chandelier encrusted with sapphire, topaz, amethyst, and ruby, from the bottom of which dangled an emerald as big as Spooky's head.

"I would imagine that you would like to see something of this land," Ozma said.

"Oh, yes. Very much," Gale replied. "Could we start with the places where Grandma lived?"

"There will be plenty of time for that later. Actually, we have a favor to ask of you, the straw man and I. As you know, your news about Dorothy was quite distressing. The Scarecrow dabbed at his eyes so much that he has smeared the paint."

"I must go to see my friend Jinjur to have my eyes repainted," the Scarecrow continued on his own. "Ordinarily, I would take the Saw-Horse and ride there all in one day, but the Saw-Horse, being the only horse here in Oz, is needed for drawing wagon loads of supplies for the party. I had hoped that you would like to come with me. I cannot see very well at the moment, and you can keep me from wandering off the path or tripping over roots and rocks along the way."

"It is a rather long walk from here to Jinjur's house, but you will see much of the land along the way," Ozma said. "I have had a basket

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prepared. The Scarecrow does not need to eat, but this will help to refresh you and Spooky along the way."

It was all very polite, but Gale didn't feel exactly as if she'd been *asked*. She wondered what would happen if she said, "No." She looked down at the cat.

"What can't be cured . . ." Spooky said with a sigh. "I suppose the exercise will do you good. You've put on a few pounds, lately." Really, the clichés an animal picked up along the way.

"I think I liked you better before you could talk," Gale said, but added a smile to let the cat know that she was kidding. Then Gale nodded and before she could say another word, she and the cat and the Scarecrow were ushered out of the palace and waved along their way, basket of food in hand.

It didn't take long to reach the east gate of the palace, which was even gaudier than Gale had expected, but once outside, things were, for a while, much as she'd imagined.

"We are still in the Emerald City," the Scarecrow told her. "We have quite a way to go before we reach the border of Munchkin Land."

Suburbs she knew. Even here, despite the strange architecture, they were so familiar that she half expected to see a shopping mall pass by at any minute. Houses neatly lined the road, each with its own flower garden, and each painted some shade of green. Of course, she would have felt more comfortable if just one had held the standard equipment of most suburban housing, but there were no rusted lawnmowers sunning themselves on the grass, no kiddy pools leaning up against the sides of the houses, no half-repaired cars. The further they walked from the city, the further apart the houses were, until at last, they reached an area of farms and rolling hillside.

They stopped for lunch at the base of a hill so picturesque it reminded Gale of a jigsaw puzzle. Wildflowers grew here and there in lovely pastel shades. None was a kind of flower she recognized. She found a log beneath a spreading tree and sat there to open the basket. Inside were cold chicken, tuna salad sandwiches, apples, grapes, a piece of cake and some overly sweet punch. She pulled some of the chicken meat off of the bones for Spooky, and, while they ate, the Scarecrow regaled them with tales of Dorothy's adventures in Oz. Some were very like the books, others wildly different. It was a shame, though, to learn about these exploits now, when it was too late to discuss them with Grandma.

The sun was getting low in the sky when they reached the border of Munchkin Land. The doorless gate they had to pass through seemed quite substantial to Gale, but the Scarecrow told them that if they shut their eyes they could walk right through, and, sure enough, they did.

"Now what, I wonder, would have happened if we'd opened our eyes when we were only half-way through?" Spooky said.

The thought made Gale shudder. All day, she had been very warm in the heavy sweater, and her feet, in sandals best left for lounging around, were sore, to say the least. Now they reached a place where the grass

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was blue—not the faded green of Kentucky bluegrass, but a royal blue, deeper than the sky. It seemed to stretch for miles in rolling hillocks on either side of the road and Gale could barely keep from lying down on it. Out of shape as she was, this had been a very long walk, and the Scarecrow's pace was brisk indeed. She tried her best to keep up, but her pace got slower and slower. "I can't take another step," she said at last.

"It's not much farther to Jinjur now, but we'll never make it before dark if you stop to rest," the Scarecrow said.

"Listen, I can't even spend a whole day at Bloomie's without sitting down for a *minute,*" Gale replied. "If I'd known I was coming I'd have brought better shoes." She took off her sandals, rubbing her poor, sore feet. "Tell you what," she went on, "I'm just gonna wiggle my toes in this nice, cool, blueberry grass for a little bit, then we can get with the program." She yawned, lying back to stretch, and, without intending to, fell asleep.

The Scarecrow looked down on the blurry form that was Gale and shook his head. He wondered, at first, if this was some kind of magic spell, like the poisoned poppy field that had put Dorothy to sleep on her first visit, but Spooky showed no signs of drowsiness. She was busily chasing a lunchpail seed as it floated along on the evening breeze.

Satisfied that he would have to wait here until morning, the Scarecrow sat down on a rock, prepared to spend the night deep in heavy thought. It was much later, the cat now sound asleep at Gale's side, that the man of straw noticed a light shining off in the distance. His vision was quite hazy, and he could not tell if the light was moving, but it could be a signal of some sort. Perhaps he should go and investigate. His companions were sleeping quite soundly, and surely he'd be back before they woke. Slowly, he made his way across the field, tripping several times over roots and rocks. Being merely a sack of cloth filled with straw, the falls did not hurt, and eventually he found himself at a fence.

The light was quite close now. The Scarecrow called and called, but no one answered him. It was not until he was right on top of the light that he realized what it was. Someone had left a lantern sitting on a fence post, most likely forgotten there until morning. No one seemed to be in need of aid. Feeling rather foolish, he turned to make his way back to their camp. But which way had he come? The moon had set, and morning was not so terribly far away, but he could see nothing, once he turned away from the light. "It must have been that way," he said to himself, and headed in what he hoped was the right direction.

Spooky woke early the next morning. The sun was just coming up over the horizon, sprinkling patches of light across the blue grass. Here and there, a wisp of straw dotted the landscape, blown by the morning breeze. It was the only sign that the Scarecrow had ever existed.

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"Now, where on earth has he gone off to?" Spooky said to no one in particular. Gale looked quite cozy, spread out on the grass, snoring gently. The cat hated to wake her up, but there seemed to be nothing else to do. "Get up, Sleepyhead," she said, tapping Gale gently. The woman rolled over onto her side with a moan. Okay, if stronger measures were needed, Spooky T. Cat was up to them! She tried to find a place in the small of Gale's back to press her cold nose into. That one *always* worked, but this time, Gale's sweater was tucked into her pants and no skin was exposed. Still, there was one time-honored method left. This one never failed. It was the one Spooky used when Gale had both forgotten to leave out water *and* remembered to close the toilet lid. She jumped onto Gale's side, placed a paw on either side of Gale's ear, and, putting her cold, wet nose against the skin, shouted into the ear. If a meow woke Gale up at home, Spooky's cry of "Get your buns out of bed!" jerked her right to a sitting position. Spooky found herself flying through the air.

"What?" Gale said, foggily. She shook her head. Where was everyone? "Spooky?" she called. "Scarecrow?"

"He's not here," Spooky said, jumping back over the small hedge behind which she'd been thrown.

"Where on earth did he go?" Gale asked.

"Good question," Spooky said. "But unless he's hidden his stuffing and rolled himself into a ball as a practical joke, he was gone before I got up."

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Gale stood up, stretched, and, placing her hand along her eyebrows, scanned the horizon in every direction. "I don't see him anywhere," she said. "Something must have happened to him. I mean, you don't think he'd just leave us, do you?"

"Let's have breakfast and wait for him," Spooky said, already trying to open the basket.

"Stop that," Gale said. "I'm really starting to worry."

"Oh, he's just gone on ahead to Jinjur's," the cat said, still pawing at the basket.

"I don't think so. Still, I suppose it's the logical place to start," Gale said, picking up the basket. Disappointed, Spooky sat down to lick her foot. "Well, aren't you coming?" Gale asked her.

"I suppose so," the cat said. She ran a little way ahead and picked up a piece of straw in her teeth. "Or, we might try following his trail. He does seem to leave a good bit of himself behind wherever he goes." But even as she spoke, the wind lifted several pieces of straw and blew them across the field.

"It seems too windy for that," Gale said. She smiled at her pet, reaching down to pat her black and white head. "No, I think we'll follow the road to Jinjur's. If he isn't there, at least we can get some help. She knows this country. I suspect she'll have some idea where to look."

The farm was not very far along the road. Gale felt so good this morning that it was easy to forget the pain and fatigue of the night before. She began to feel a bit guilty; they should have finished their trip last night. She opened the gate and let herself and Spooky inside.

This had to be Jinjur's place. It was a neat little home, much like the others she'd passed along the way, but where they had all been done in shades of a single color, this one, while mainly the blue of Munchkin Land, had traces of red, yellow, green, and purple in the designs on its door and shutters. Once, before Ozma was the ruler of Oz, Jinjur had led a revolt against the Scarecrow, and for a time she had been Queen of Oz. It was a pleasant, gentle reminder keeping all the colors of Oz about her house, though her Munchkin neighbors found the place a bit gaudy. Gale smiled on seeing this, for it was one bit of Oz history with which she was familiar from reading the books, and she well knew what it was those bits of color meant. The young woman who answered the door was very pretty, with a fresh, freckled face under her short, dark, curly hair and beautiful, bright blue eyes. She looked them over quizzically. "But you're a *woman*, aren't you?" Jinjur asked.

"Yes," Gale said, just as puzzled by her reaction. In the morning, with nothing but a comb at her disposal, Gale had pushed her hair behind her ears. Now, she ran her fingers through it so that it fell softly around her face. Then, she noticed that her hair was not where the other's attention was directed. She looked down at her slacks, patted them meaningfully, and placed her foot up on the fence rail. "They're quite the rage where I come from," she said.

"Yes," the woman said, hesitantly. "Yes, I can see that they might be.

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They look quite . . . um . . . comfortable. I don't know as I'd ever find them pretty, but I bet I could get used to wearing something like that."

Gale laughed and extended her hand. "You must be Jinjur," she said.

"At your service. And you?" Jinjur asked.

"Oh, I'm sorry. My name is Gale and this is Spooky. We were accompanying the Scarecrow, who was coming to get his eyes repainted, only we seem to have misplaced him."

Jinjur looked quite worried after Gale explained their problem. "No, he certainly would not have come here without you. I can't imagine where he would have gone, but if he really couldn't see very well, perhaps he's gotten lost. My husband is busy with the cows at the moment, but if you'd like to go wait in the house, he'll be with you shortly. I made enough breakfast for everyone. You could go start on it while you're waiting."

Ecstatic, Spooky headed toward the kitchen, but stopped in disappointment when she heard Gale say, "Wouldn't it be better if we both went out looking? We could cover more territory that way."

Jinjur looked at her gravely. "There are some dangers, still, in the land of Oz. Even your grandmother wasn't anxious to walk these roads alone."

"But I'm no more alone than she was," Gale said, nodding her head at Spooky, who was doing her best to hide behind a chair. Gale was certainly as brave as Dorothy had been, and, unlike Dorothy, she was not a little girl.

As they got to the fence, Jinjur turned to Gale and said, "Keep to the road going that way. If he's near the road, he will hear you call, for his ears are very good. And remember, go only half as far as you think you can walk, for if you don't make it back by nightfall, we'll all be out looking for *you* come morning."

Gale and Spooky watched as Jinjur ran across the field, calling for her friend. Once she had disappeared from view, they took off in the opposite direction. They followed the road, shouting for the straw man, stopping from time to time to look at a distant figure, but always it turned out to be some Munchkin farmer who had not seen their friend. At houses they passed, they always stopped to ask, but all to no avail.

They ran across one Munchkin boy who gave them hope, a tow-haired child of about eight or nine, who reminded Gale uncannily of Tom Sawyer. He had seen a scarecrow, he told them, and even led them to it, but it was still attached to its pole, and quite as inanimate as the day it was put together. Gale thanked him and started back toward the road, yet the boy seemed reluctant to let them go.

"Stay for lunch," he offered. Gale was anxious to get on with the search, but this time Spooky refused.

"I'm not budging another inch until I get something to eat!" the cat said, and Gale politely accepted the boy's offer.

"It's lovely having visitors from the outside," the boy, whose name was Toki, said. "How I would love to see the outside world."

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"Then why don't you go?" Spooky asked.

"Don't talk with your mouth full," Gale said, reflexively, then added, "Besides, he can't go. If he left Oz, the spell would be broken, and he would get old. Someday, he would die."

"Yes!" the boy said with a sad smile on his face. "How lovely!" He blushed at the puzzled look Gale gave him, and shrugged his shoulders. "I suppose if I had been grown when the spell was cast, I would feel differently, but I have been a boy for over a hundred years. Now I would gladly face a thousand deaths for the chance of growing up. How I would dearly love to know that someday I would be a *man*."

Gale suppressed an urge to laugh. It wasn't funny. Not at all. It was just that she'd been wishing so hard that she could be young again, she'd completely forgotten how much she'd wished at the time to be grown. Being twelve forever was sad indeed. "Why don't you go, then?" she asked.

"Oh, if I only could," he said, shaking his head. "To see someplace really exotic, like *Kansas!* Why, I've even heard tell that there are places in the world where a person could wear any color they wanted. A shirt of red and gold, maybe, with bright green trousers. I wouldn't even care if my neighbors thought me gaudy. But it isn't possible. The only way to leave Oz is through magic," Toki said, as if this was answer enough.

"I'm sure the Wizard would send you, if you asked," Gale said.

"The Wizard? Why, the Wizard left us many years ago."

"Well, then, why not ask Ozma? I'll ask her for you, if you wish," Gale offered.

"Ozma is a good and gentle ruler," the boy said. "I'm sure she would be most sorry to find how unhappy I am, but she would not help me to leave. It is illegal for a citizen to leave the land of Oz. This is a law that Ozma wrote herself, for that is the only way that the world would find out about us."

"Is it even illegal to wear whatever colors you want?" Gale asked. His dream outfit sounded awful to her, but certainly no worse than the dresses that Ozma wore. Just how repressive could this Ozma be?

"That I don't know. Blue is the designated color of Munchkin Land, and for some reason, Princess Ozma seems to think we all prefer it that way. I don't." He shook his head, sadly. "But perhaps most do. I can't tell you if it is against the law to wear other colors here, but it certainly is not done."

Gale and Spooky thanked him for the lunch. "I will try to think of some way to help you," she said, and, waving good-bye, started back down the road.

As they walked on, the houses were, once again, built further and further apart, but for all that space, they seemed, somehow, cozier and better kept, so they were surprised to come upon one that didn't seem to fit in at all. The gate was open, and hung slightly askew on its moorings, one corner sinking in a pool of mud. The shutters, where they were still attached to the windows, were clean enough, but some had fallen

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into the dust and had been left to lie there untended. The crops that Gale could see, off in the fields, were sparse and choked by brambles, and even the garden was filled with weeds. Beside the house, a woman, much thinner and more haggard than Gale was used to seeing in this pretty land, was fighting a monumental battle with a bush of thorns, which was encroaching on her bread tree. It was obvious that she was not up to the task. Hoping not to distract her when she was so busy, Gale and Spooky tiptoed past, but the woman spotted them, and her face lit up.

"Hello!" she called out. "It's so nice to *see* you," she said, "Of course, it is nice to see *anyone*, but it is especially nice to see you. I don't mean to be rude, but I can tell by your clothing that you are a stranger here in Oz. Why, I bet you even know Princess Ozma!" Gale's nod was enough reply. "Won't you come in and sit for a while? Have something to drink? Oh, please don't mind how the place looks. You see, I live here all alone, and I can't find anyone to help me with the work. Oh, do come inside." And having spoken too quickly for Gale or Spooky to get a word in, she rushed indoors before the pair could decline.

Gale did not want to go. She was fairly certain that there would be much searching yet to do, but the woman looked so lonely that Gale hated to disappoint her.

"I really can't stay," Gale blurted out, before the woman could start talking again.

"I know," the woman said sadly. "But though I would dearly love the company, I had another reason for asking you in. I know that I barely know you and this is a very big favor to ask, but I hope you might be willing to do something for me. My name is Dretin, and I would like you to put in a word for me with Ozma."

"What sort of word?" Gale asked, doubtfully.

"I would like Ozma to give me permission to move to the city," she said. "I know that she turned my request down before, and being a good and just ruler, I'm sure she was right to do so, but things were different then. I had my daughter with me, and she could help with the work. Now, she has married a man in the Quadling Country and gone to live with him there. Now I am all alone and I haven't the strength to do all this work by myself. I know she will think I am lazy, but that is not true. I am very good with needlework," she said brightly, pointing with pride to the room. Unlike the outside of the house, the inside was neat as a pin. Beautiful crochet work covered almost every surface that Gale could see, from delicate little doilies on the end tables to an exquisite cloth on the dining-room table, intricately designed with flowers and trees.

"You did all this?" Gale said. "It's lovely."

"Thank you," Dretin said. "I think that I could earn my living with this work, if I lived in the Emerald City. Please ask her for me. I do not think I could make the journey again by myself."

"You need *permission* to move to the city? Why did she refuse?" Gale

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asked, the roses of anger rising in her cheeks. What sort of place *was* this, anyway?

"She was very sweet, but she told me it could not be. 'What would happen,' she said, 'if all the farmers moved to the city? Farmers are better off and happier working on their farms.' I know that she must be right, but I am not very good at farming. Even my last bread tree is dying, and when it is gone, I shall starve. Besides, I'm *so* lonely. It's lonely here all the time. Please ask her for me! Please!"

"Dretin, I will do what I can," Gale said. "And now, I'm sorry to say, I must leave. But before I go, would you answer one question for me?"

"Of course, if I can," Dretin said.

"Do you really like the color blue?" Gale asked.

"Why of course I . . ." she began, then her eyes narrowed and she looked around suspiciously. "If I never see anything blue again," Dretin whispered, "I will be a most happy woman."

It was still early afternoon. There was time to walk a little bit further. Both the day and the scenery were lovely, but Gale's mind was neither on her surroundings, nor her quarry, though she continued to call for the Scarecrow from time to time.

"I wonder if we can do anything to help these people," Gale said as they walked. "I always thought, from reading the books, that the people of Oz were happy, jolly souls. I never thought they'd have problems like anyone else."

"I don't know how to help the lady, but you could put the boy in your luggage when you go—if you had any luggage, that is," Spooky said.

"When *I* go? Aren't you coming with me?" Gale asked.

"I haven't decided yet. Happens, I rather like this 'talking' shit," Spooky said.

"I doubt they'll let you stay if you don't watch your language," Gale said. "Where did you pick that up, anyway? I always thought you were such a sweet cat."

"Sweet? Who wants to be sweet?" Spooky said. "Ozma is sweet! They all seem to think so. Look where it gets her subjects."

"Spooky! How uncharitable," Gale said.

"I'm a cat," the animal responded. "I'm not supposed to be charitable. Besides, you've got to admit it's true."

"I suppose so. I do think Ozma *means* well, only . . . Shit! What can we do about it, is the question."

"Hey, it's not our problem. I don't see why we have to do anything. And, by the way, I picked the 'language' up from you." The cat stopped walking suddenly, moving her head back and forth as if she was puzzled. "Now look what you've gone and done," she said, after a moment of silence. "You got me so distracted that I didn't see which way we came."

Gale looked around her, noticing for the first time that they were in the middle of a dark, blue forest. The trees weren't much taller than Gale herself, but they were set so close together that there was hardly room to walk between them. The path they were on was wide, but behind

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them it forked off in several directions, any one of which could have been the one that had brought them to their present location. She looked at each path closely, but they were all much the same, and the hard ground showed no evidence of footprints.

"It hasn't been long since we left Dretin's house, so the road can't be all that far behind us. We'll just have to go a little way down each path, and if it doesn't seem right, we'll come back here and try again." Gale picked a road, and, opening the basket, she took an apple core, leaving it part way down the road so they would know which path they had taken. Each time they came to a fork, she left another item, but the road was so twisty-turny that even when they gave up and started back, they could find no sign of the way they had come.

"Why don't you give up and admit we're lost?" Spooky said, eventually. "This is the third time we've passed this same house."

"I don't see how you can tell," Gale said. "Except for Dretin's place, they've all looked more or less the same."

"Well, unless they all have a funny, crooked chimney and a broken bucket in the yard, we've been here before," Spooky answered.

"I suppose we'll have to ask for directions," Gale said. No one answered her call, but her gentle knock pushed the door open. Inside, a pleasant fire burned in the hearth, lighting the neatly whitewashed walls. A single table and some chairs were the room's only furnishings, but something on the table reflected the firelight in a strange, rainbow glow. Suddenly, like a startled deer, the rainbow slid across the table, dropped to a chair, rolled off the edge, landing on the floor with a wet smack, and skittered out of sight in the far corner. So surprised were the two travelers that they completely forgot their manners and entered the house to find the source of the rainbow.

Deep inside the room, away from the light from the fire and the doorway, the walls were steeped in shadow, for there was no window in the room. In the gloom, it took a while to spot the thing that had caught their attention. Then, when they did finally find it, hiding back in the shadows, it was so strange that they could hardly believe their eyes. There was little doubt that it was alive, and, at first, they thought it was a tiny, crystal girl, but it soon melted down to a puddle, then collected itself into a ball.

"Go away!" it said in a high, tinkling voice that trembled with fright.

"Don't be frightened," Gale said. "I won't hurt you."

"Not you," the thing replied. "That!" Only then did Gale notice Spooky. The cat resembled a Halloween decoration, her eyes wide, back arched and teeth bared, her tail blown out as if she'd stuck her paw into an electric socket. Gingerly, Gale picked the cat up and hugged her to her chest.

"What is that?" Spooky and the thing both shrieked together.

"Now stop it, both of you," Gale said. "There's no reason to be afraid. This is Spooky, and she's a cat, but I'm afraid I don't know who or what you are," she added gently.

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The creature pulled itself back into the shape of a tiny girl, about a foot tall. She was obviously not made out of crystal, for even in the dimly lit corner, she rippled and shimmered all over. Somehow, without moving, she seemed to be constantly swirling.

"She won't hurt me?" the child asked. Her voice sounded very young.

"Spooky?" Gale said to the cat sternly.

"She startled me," Spooky answered with just a trace of petulance. She hid her face in Gale's shoulder, then slowly raised her eyes. "It's okay," she said, turning to look at the child. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you."

"What are you doing here?" said an angry voice from the doorway. Gale swung around.

There was a woman standing in the doorway. She wore the traditional blue dress of the Munchkin people, and she had obviously been out harvesting her trees, for she carried three lunchpails and two loaves of bread in her arms. These she threw on the table angrily, and turned to face Gale, arms akimbo.

"Please don't be angry," Gale said. "I didn't mean to enter your house without permission, but the door came open when I knocked, and I saw this creature here, and . . ."

"You saw her?" the woman asked, her voice cracking with emotion. Suddenly, Gale realized that it wasn't anger she was hearing. The woman was very badly frightened.

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"Please don't be afraid," Gale said. "We won't do anything to harm you."

The woman sighed and a look of terrible sadness came over her face, but she said nothing. She sat down at the table, resting both elbows on its surface, and hid her head in her hands.

"Listen," Gale said. "I'm Gale, and this is my cat Spooky. Perhaps if you will tell us what your problem is, we could do something to help."

"Oh dear, oh dear. I don't know what to do," the woman said, then she straightened up, resigned, and said, "I'm Silka, and this is Drips. And she is not a 'creature,' " the woman added vehemently.

"Oh, I'm very sorry. I didn't mean . . ."

"No, I know you didn't. I'm not used to being rude, but you see, your coming has made things difficult. You're not from Oz, are you?" she said.

"No," Gale said, "I'm not."

"Well, you see, things were not always the way they are now in Oz," Silka began. "Once the land was wild, full of magicians and witches, some good and some bad. One of them, Dr. Pipt, the Crooked Magician, made a miraculous substance he called The Powder of Life, which would bring inanimate things to life. That is how we have the Saw-Horse and Jack Pumpkinhead, among other creatures.

"I was a seamstress. A very good seamstress, if I do say so myself. I could make dresses that shimmered like the sun and cloaks as mysterious as moonlight. From all over Oz, people would come to me for clothing, but it was a lot of work and I had no one to help me, so Dr. Pipt, whose wife Margolette loved to wear my clothes, gave me some of his powder so that I could make a helper. I suppose they envisioned someone like the patchwork girl they later made themselves, but I needed someone sturdy to cut the fabric and help with the cleaning up. However, before I could fashion one sturdy enough for my needs, everything changed.

"Ozma was discovered, and proclaimed the ruler of Oz. I was quite happy about this, for I thought her a lovely child, but one of the first things she did was to make all magic illegal except for what she licensed herself, and the only magicians she would license were her friends, Glinda, the good witch of the South, and the Wizard, of course. At first, I thought I would travel to the Emerald City and petition Ozma for permission to make a helper, but when I learned that she had stripped Dr. Pipt of all his magical powers, I decided it was probably better to throw the powder away. After all, there wasn't much of it, anyway. Besides, I have always tried to be a good and honest citizen of Oz. I took the box and tossed it into the old, dried-up well behind my house. What I had forgotten was that, long before, I had dropped an old gingerbread pan down the self-same well.

"I can only imagine that the box spilled into the pan, and water must have filled up the mold, for the very next time that it rained, this little girl appeared," she pointed at Drips, who bowed politely.

"She is made entirely of water," Silka continued, "and shaped exactly like the gingerbread cakes I used to make. At first, I thought we should

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go to Ozma and ask her what to do. We prepared for the journey and even started out, but, having no children of my own, I realized that I loved this little girl dearly. Then I began to worry. Suppose Ozma decided that Drips should live with *her* at the palace? All of the other magical creatures seem to wind up living there. Suppose Ozma decided to banish us from Oz? Would the magic that made Drips live even work anywhere outside of Oz? I was so worried that I could not go on. Then I remembered hearing that Ozma had given Ojo and Unc Nunkie a brand new house. This meant that their old house would be empty. True, they had a great deal of difficulty growing enough to eat, but that wouldn't be a problem for us. I am quite a hand with a garden, and Drips merely has to poke a seed in the ground to find herself sitting atop a tree. And we have been happy here ever since, until you came. Now Ozma will know about us. I don't know what to do." On that note, Silka hid her head in her hands once again.

Gale patted Silka's arm. "But I would never say anything to Ozma if you didn't want me to," Gale said.

"That would not matter. It is rumored that Ozma has a magic picture in which she can see what anyone in Oz is doing merely by thinking of them. Since she has never heard of me, I was fairly safe from her observation. But *you* must be much on her mind. I would be most surprised if she isn't watching us right at this minute."

"*Watching* us?" Gale said. "*Spying*? Why, that's horrible!" She turned to the cat. "Ozma is Big Brother! Spooky, we're being bugged."

"Oh no. I keep a *clean* house," Silka said.

Gale did not bother to explain. "We can't just sit by and do nothing," she said to her cat. "These people need our help." And slowly, a plan began to evolve in her mind.

"Did many people in Oz use magic?" Gale asked Silka.

"Oh yes," Silka replied. "Some were very wicked, of course, but most just used it to make a special cake or create a lovely fabric, such as the kind I made dresses out of."

"Do you know how Dr. Pipt felt about being stripped of his powers?" Gale asked.

"Well, Ozma did straighten his limbs and he is no longer crooked, but I rather think, on the whole, he misses making his potions. And why not, after the years he dedicated to finding the right mixture for special elixirs and such?"

"If the people of Oz are unhappy, why don't they do something about it?" Gale asked.

"I don't know that everyone is unhappy. Besides, what is there to do? Ozma is not an evil ruler, or we would do our best to remove her. What she does, she does only to help. Even I can see that there are good and sound reasons behind everything she does."

Spooky and Drips were busy playing some version of tag, laughing and screaming and chasing each other around the room. They were making, Gale hoped, enough noise to mask the conversation from prying

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ears. Still, she spoke very softly. "Just because her choices work doesn't mean they are the only ones, nor even the best ones . . . . We have a saying where I come from, that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. You can cure someone of a toothache by cutting off their head, but that does not make it the desirable solution!" Gale slammed her fist on the table. She was beginning to get that old feeling back, and she liked it quite a bit. Silka looked up at her, and the light kindling in her eyes told a story Gale knew quite well. It had never occurred to these people that there was anything they could do about oppression and injustice, short of a full-blown revolution. "Ozma is like the cloth you used to work," Gale said. "However beautiful and magical, it doesn't really reach its full potential until it is cut and shaped and stitched."

"Yes," Silka said, tentatively at first, then more forcefully, "Yes! But how do we work this cloth that will not bend to a simple scissors?"

"Oh, there are ways, if the people want change enough to *fight* for it. No, Silka, I don't mean with spears and swords. I don't believe in violence. I guess you've never heard of Gandhi, or Martin Luther King, but, trust me, there *are* other ways, better ways, to impose the will of the people. Even so, I must warn you that there are some dangers. If they decide we are merely troublemakers, they could make things very hard for us all."

"I do not care about that," Silka said. "I will not raise a weapon against our Princess, but I will gladly do anything else that I can to keep my Drips with me. Especially if it means that I can go back to living among people again. Back to making my magical clothes."

"Ah, the clothes," Gale said, more to herself than to Silka. "Yes, I must talk to you about that someday."

Silka got up and poured three glasses of juice and a saucer of milk for the cat. Together, they toasted their new-found determination.

"Do you think that your friend Dr. Pipt would be willing to join us?" Gale asked.

"That I cannot say for sure," Silka answered, "But he might, for a peaceful means to regain his magic. If you'd like, I can take you to ask him."

"I'm afraid you must go by yourselves. I have tons of work left to do, and I must get to Jinjur's by nightfall."

"Then we will meet you there," Silka said.

Once Silka and Drips had led the two travelers to the road, they turned back into the forest toward Dr. Pipt's house. Gale and Spooky waved good-bye until they were out of sight, then Gale said, "Come along, Spooky. It's almost too late to make it back to the farm as it is, and we have a few things to do along the way."

Jinjur was standing by the fence when they got back, a worried look on her face, but she brightened immediately when she saw them. "I was just about to go out looking for *you*," she said. "And I thought I'd done enough searching for one day."

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"You found the Scarecrow, then?" Gale asked. "He's here?"

"Yes, and no. I found him almost right away. He'd seen some light in the distance and thought it might mean trouble, but after he went to investigate—it wasn't anything at all, by the way—he had so much trouble seeing in the dark that he couldn't find his way back." Jinjur stopped and brushed the hair from in front of her eye, then continued. "I patched him up and sent him on his way. I hope you don't mind, but he was anxious to get back by nightfall. I've had a bit of an itch to get back to the Emerald City myself, so I thought I'd bring you both up in the morning. If that's all right with you."

"Actually," Gale said, thoughtfully, "I'm rather glad." They walked in silence toward the house, but just outside the door Gale stopped and looked at the lovely young woman. "Jinjur?" she said, softly. "I don't know how accurate Mr. Baum's books were, of course, but I seem to recall that you once led a revolution. Is that right?"

Jinjur smiled nostalgically, shook her head, and laughed. "That was a long time ago," she said.

"Why did you do it?" Gale asked.

At first, she thought that Jinjur was going to brush her off with a flip response, but the woman seemed to change her mind. She cocked her head to the side as if she were carefully weighing her answer. Finally, she shrugged her shoulders, and said, "I guess I was bored. Well, that's not exactly right. I think just about every wife and daughter in Oz was fed to the teeth with doing all of the housework and half of the work in the fields. I just thought that if I was Queen, someone else would do all that work *for* me." She stopped for a moment and looked down at her feet. The shame was simulated, though, for her eyes were alight. "And then there were all those emeralds . . ." she added.

"Are you sorry that you were defeated?" Gale asked.

"Well, yes and no. I mean, Ozma's a real sweet kid. I think I'd rather have her ruling Oz than anyone else I can think of, but starting out as a boy like she did—you did know that she was bewitched by old Mombi, and turned into a boy for a while? Well, even Mombi, evil as she was, didn't work 'her' the way most girls have to work. She doesn't really understand how hard it can be. So, no, I don't want to rule Oz. That's even more work than this, and I guess I'm a little bit lazy. But there are some things I'd like to see change around here."

"Good!" Gale said it so vehemently that Jinjur stared at her in surprise. "Now, how would you like to help me make a few of those changes?" she asked, and, without waiting for an answer, she ran back to the fence, leaned over it and waved until Toki came into view pushing a wheelbarrow. Dretin sat in the barrow, her legs hanging over the edge, Silka and Drips right behind.

"The people of Oz don't seem very happy," Gale said when they were all seated around the table. Even Jinjur's husband Luke was there, a

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handsome young man, and quite tall for a Munchkin. He was almost as tall as Gale.

"I am happy," he said. "I have nine fat cows and a lovely wife who cooks for me and keeps my house spotless. Why would I not be happy?"

"Oh, go milk your cows!" Jinjur told him, and the squint-eyed look that accompanied her words was one Gale had seen on far too many wives in her lifetime. Another thing to work on while she was here. When he was gone, the talk continued.

"This will be a long hard battle," Gale said.

Jinjur snorted. "An old woman, a little boy, a girl made of water, and three healthy adults does not seem like much of an army to me. That would not be battle, it would be a slaughter! We would not even make it through Ozma's small forces, let alone Glinda's army, unless you know of some weapon I haven't heard of."

"Wait a minute," Gale told them. She called Drips over and whispered to the child.

"Sure," Drips replied. "That will be fun." She jumped up on the table and began making noises like a roaring waterfall. Silka tried to stop her, but Gale said to let her be. It was loud, but they could hear each other well enough. If the noise covered their conversation from Ozma's prying ears, so much to the good. Then she told them her plan.

"We don't want an armed revolution, Jinjur. I, for one, don't like the idea of war. What we need to do is show Ozma that the people aren't happy. If that, alone, isn't enough, there are ways to force her to listen, without violence."

"How?" Jinjur asked. Gale could tell that she would take a lot of convincing.

"Well, for one, she needs things to make Oz work. She needs farmers, dairymen, weavers, carpenters, and herders. If enough people refuse to do any work except for their own needs, what can she do? Eventually, she would run out of everything. Then, she would have to negotiate with us in order to get it, or the whole system would fail. Second, she must be able to get into and out of the palace. If we block the steps with our bodies, she may be able to have us carried off, even put in jail, but how many cells does she have? Sooner or later, if there are enough of us, she will grow weary of the fight. One way or another, she will have to negotiate. But that is a long, slow process that's hard on everyone. Our best hope is to organize all of the discontented people in Oz. If we all arrive at the palace, all on the very same day, carrying signs and chanting slogans and generally showing that we are willing to do whatever it takes . . . . If there are enough of us, that threat alone might do the job."

Dretin was sitting by the fireplace, crocheting quietly. Now, she put down her needlework and looked up at Gale. "What is to keep her from simply killing us all? Well, maybe not *kill* us, but she could turn us into statues, or maybe even just make us disappear."

"I don't think that she would, but that is why it's so important that we get as many people as we can. She simply *can't* get rid of everyone.

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Who would she have left to rule? But I don't think that's a problem. Not if Ozma is really as good and true as you all believe her to be. If that's so, she will not willingly hurt her people once she knows that this is their will. But we must work quickly. By now, Ozma knows that we are up to something. It's while we're only a small handful that we are in the most danger, for she could capture us all, and if she believes that we are only a few misguided souls, she will not listen to anything we say."

"But there is no way to spread information that quickly," Jinjur said.

"I am very fast," Toki said, proudly. "I could cover several farms in a single day."

"It would still take weeks to cover Munchkin Land alone," Dretin said. "Even if we all worked at it, though I'm not sure how much help I could be."

"I know! I know!" Drips said. She had stopped roaring and was jumping excitedly up and down on the table. "Birds!" she exclaimed, triumphantly. "Birds!"

"Where?" Spooky asked, looking interested for the first time in the whole proceeding. Gale hushed her with a look.

"What about birds?" Gale asked.

"Birds are my friends," Drips said, causing Gale and Dretin to smile indulgently, and Jinjur to snort in derision.

"No, wait," Silka said. "I think I understand what she means. She is always playing with the birds. They try to drink her, which, of course, they can't. Well, don't you *see?*" she said to a group of blank faces. "Birds go everywhere. They fly quickly, and they can carry a message. All we have to do is teach Drips what message to give them, and we can spread the word to all of Oz in a day!"

"You know, that just might work," Jinjur said, looking at Drips with renewed respect. "But can she memorize enough of a message."

"Drips is very smart. I'm sure she can do it," Silka said.

"Good," Gale said. "Now all we have to do is figure out which slogans to teach her. 'Ban the Bomb' is the one that sticks in my mind, but I don't think it really applies."

Cockcrow woke them the next morning. It was not easy for Gale to get going after the late night they'd all had. Nor was it easy for her to wash up. Drips had learned a new game. It was enormously funny for the little water child to hide in the wash bowl, where she was virtually invisible. Every time Gale put her hands into the water, she found herself scooping up Drips. The child was cool on her face, but did little to wash away the grime of sleep. "Drips!" Gale said, but the water-child dissolved into peals of laughter that sent a shower of rainbows around the room. Even Gale found herself laughing as she managed to wash at last. "Yes, you're right," she told the child. "This is going to be fun."

Jinjur had thoughtfully made breakfast for everyone, and while it was not so lavish as the one Ozma had provided, it was simple, hearty fare that filled them up and got them ready for a long, busy day.

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Not long after, the good Dr. Pipt and his lovely wife arrived, and Gale set to explaining what they wanted to do.

Margolette spoke first. "For myself, I have not been unhappy, but I have seen the sadness, the feeling of worthlessness, in my good husband's eyes. There is nothing I wouldn't do to give him back his magic. And," she added, putting an arm around Silka's shoulder, "to regain my dressmaker in the bargain would be more than wonderful."

Dr. Pipt, however, did not so easily agree. He was an average-sized man, just tall enough that Gale might have rested her chin upon his round, bald head. His arms and legs showed no sign of their one-time crookedness, but they were almost as thin as Jack Pumpkinhead's, and looked quite strange connected to his round-bellied frame. Yet though he seemed rather quaint, there was dignity in his eyes. He put his hands on Gale's shoulders and stared into her face for a very long time. "Ah yes," he said, at last. "The heart is good. Even so, we must tread carefully, lest we lose more than we gain."

Dr. Pipt helped Gale to write a speech for Drips. "We must be very careful how we word it," he told her. "Most people are not willing to admit that they are unhappy. Oh, yes, they grumble and complain, but they weather the storms like rocks, unable to move until someone kicks them over. Our words must provide a solid kick. Look at me. I am the perfect example. I gave up my magic willingly, because I was remorseful at turning my wife and my friend into statues. Even though it was an accident, I felt the guilt. But even without that, I would still have done so, for it was my only chance to save them. I let myself be stripped of all my powers, and told myself that I was happy. I was a whole man for the first time in life, and my wife was soft warm flesh again." He shook his head sadly. "Not until Silka brought your message did I realize the truth. I would do it again for my dear Margolette, but I will never be happy about it. Gladly would I give up my straight legs and arms, for without my magic, I am nothing."

Margolette flew to his side and gave him a kiss. "You could never be nothing, my dear," she said to him. "He has always used his magic for good. Never would he deliberately hurt anyone. So why does Ozma have the right to take his powers? If she fears allowing magic in the world, then why not strip Glinda as well? It is true that my husband made a mistake with the magic, but if I, who was its victim, am not offended, what right does Ozma have to call him dangerous?"

"Now, dear," the little man said.

"No, she keeps all the magic for her *friends* alone! It is time that someone spoke up," Margolette sniffed. "It isn't fair!"

Gale helped Silka teach the child her speech. She was very bright, but it was a long and complicated message and it was important that she get it right. Plans would follow the rhetoric. People should make signs and create slogans to express their grievances. They would meet in two days time on the Palace lawns, where further instructions would be given. Finally, Gale taught her a song. They had agonized over this one,

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because while nightingales and thrushes sang beautifully, crows most certainly did not, and who knew which kind of bird would deliver each message?

"Oh, go ahead," Spooky urged her. "They can't sing any worse than you do."

Finally, everything was ready. Nervously, they followed Drips out into the field until she motioned for them to wait, fearing their presence would frighten her friends. She bunched herself into a ball and rolled across the grass, becoming a definite blue against that background, until she came to a large open space. When she had gone far enough, she straightened into her little girl form, raising one fisted arm in the signal that Gale had taught her.

Drips whistled twice, and three small birds dropped down from the sky at her side. Watching from a distance, Gale thought that they seemed to be playing. Indeed, she could hear Drips's merry laughter ripple through her prismatic form. Eventually, more birds joined them, then more and more, until there was a very large and very mixed flock on the lawn. Gale was much too busy holding on to Spooky—whose hungry cries of "Birds! Look! Birds! Lemme go, birds! Ooooh, birds!" must almost have been loud enough for the whole flock to hear—to notice when they got down to serious talk. For a while, all they could hear was Drips. Not words, exactly. It sounded more like the gentle splash of a distant stream. When she stopped speaking, the flock began to discuss things amongst themselves, an event which occasioned much bickering and set Spooky scrambling once more to get free.

This went on for almost an hour. All were beginning to despair of getting the assistance they sought, when the largest of the birds, a huge crow, broke from the crowd to stand alone on the grass just before the assemblage of people.

"We do not share your needs," he said in a cold and grating voice. "We are already free to live where we wish, and to work as much or as little as suits us."

"Oh, we are lost," Silka moaned, picking up the water-child and cradling her in her arms.

"Birds," the crow continued, "are fair-minded creatures. We understand your needs, even though we do not share them. We *will* help you." A cheer went up from the group. The crow raised a wing and waited until they were silent. "But only to the extent of carrying your message. Nothing more."

Gale drew a deep breath, her first for several minutes, and bowed deeply to the crow. "We could ask no more of you," she said. "This is the way it should be. Let the people of Oz decide."

All through the day and well into the night, the birds did their work. In Quadling Country, a cardinal flew through the window of a little red house and spoke to the crimson-clad woman inside. A martin stopped two children in purple overalls as they carried pails of water to their

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home in Gillikin Country. Outside the Tin Woodman's castle in Winkie Country, an oriole stopped some guards in yellow uniforms and whispered into their ears. Even the Emerald City was not immune as word spread throughout the land. No care had been taken to keep Ozma from learning of their plans, for surely, with her wonderful magic picture, she must already know.

Indeed Ozma had been watching. She knew that plans were afoot, but exactly what they were she wasn't quite sure. She had not been able to hear many of the whispered conversations, and many of the concepts were new to her. "I knew that woman would cause trouble," she said to Tik-Tok. "And after I was nice enough to make her a princess, too. But I know just what to do about it. Have Jellia Jamb bring me my magic belt. I will send her right back to Kansas. That will be the end of *that* problem."

"I will tell Jellia Jamb to get the belt, if you wish," Tik-Tok said, "but though I do not like to contradict you, you cannot sent Princess Gale back to Kansas. She is a princess of Oz, whether we wish it to be so, or not. As such, she is entitled to remain here until *she* wishes to go."

Ozma looked irate. "Well, she can *not* be permitted to start a revolution," the princess said. "If I cannot send her home, you will simply have to go and arrest her!"

"Yes, your majesty," Tik-Tok said. "She is breaking the law. I will go and arrest her for you."

A mollified Ozma watched him leave, then returned to her magic picture. She didn't think the others would cause any trouble with Gale out of the way. Still, Jinjur had been a problem once before. Just to be certain, she sent Jellia Jamb off on the Saw-Horse to carry a message to Glinda. Now, with Gale as good as taken care of, and reinforcements on the way, Ozma could finally relax. Should there be trouble in the meantime, the Scarecrow, the Cowardly Lion, and the Hungry Tiger, as well as the army of Oz, sat ready to keep her safe.

Glinda sat in the garden that surrounded her beautiful palace. The air was scented with roses and the delicate, sweet smell of jasmine. Statues, half hidden in the trees, lent an air of serenity to the grounds, and helped to hide from view the ranks of soldiers who stood formation around the walls. Why Glinda needed such an army, more powerful even than that of the ruler herself, no one ever knew, but have them she did, and they were ready for use whenever needed. Their skirted uniforms of scarlet cloth were always neatly pressed. Finely honed swords hung at their sides, and their spears of polished mother-of-pearl were held firmly in hand. But none of them were visible from where Glinda sat. She stared at her fountain which showered itself with gems instead of water, and thought about her old friend, Dorothy. What a charming child she had been. It was sad to see how unhappy she'd become in the years just before she left. Still, the sorceress had felt it her duty to warn the

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girl about going back out into the world. Not that Dorothy had listened. It wasn't Dorothy's way to take such advice.

The sound of hoofbeats roused Glinda from her reverie. Jellia Jamb arrived riding the magical Saw-Horse, and insisted on giving her news before even taking time to rest. That news disturbed the sorceress greatly.

"Why did I not know about this?" Glinda said. "If Oz was in danger I should have known. My magic should have told me. Are you very sure of what's happening?"

The green-haired girl nodded. "Ozma did not hear all that was said, but she did hear Jinjur and Gale planning some great battle that was to take place at the palace in two days time," the girl said. "Why, that's tomorrow," the girl added.

"Then we must hurry," Glinda told her, "for it is a very long march from here." She sounded a call for her army, and waited impatiently for them to arrive.

"Jinjur again!" Glinda exclaimed, angrily. "What does that girl want this time?" The little maid shrugged. "She's probably after the gems again," Glinda continued. "Though why she would need them now that she is married, is more than I can say. Or maybe she wants to put the men back in the kitchen, though most of them cannot cook." She shook her head. "And where does this Gale come into it? I would have expected more from a granddaughter of Dorothy's." There was a pause, and then Glinda said, ominously, "This time, it won't be enough just to stop the revolt. This time I will have to teach them a lesson. Those girls may be tired of their work, but they aren't going to overthrow Ozma to get out of doing it!"

When the girls of her army appeared before her, Glinda examined them carefully. Their formation was perfect, and every sweet face showed a sense of pride and duty. So far, their spears and swords had never drawn blood from anyone. Nor would they this time. At least, she hoped not, for what reasonable person would resist against such formidable odds.

Motioning Jellia Jamb to join her, she climbed into her beautiful palanquin, leaned out through the satin drapes and gave the order to march.

The protesters spent the whole day planning their strategy and painting signs. Wood was plentiful enough, but there was no cardboard to be had. Jinjur sacrificed several sheets to the cause, which were stretched onto frames and then nailed onto sticks for the purpose. She had even found her old dress from the revolution. It was made up of panels with all the colors of the land. This seemed like a good time to wear it again, and Jinjur got it ready. Spooky was not much help with the work—the concept of "work" being a foreign one to cats—and when she wasn't busy throwing in suggestions, spent much of her time exploring the farm.

As for Drips, she found painting enormous fun, getting more of the paint on herself than she did on the sign. It would swirl around in her

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body in long, loopy strings, before disappearing in a spiral, like water going down the drain. The child would watch it go and laugh. She had painted one sign for Gale that read "BAN THE BOMB!" At first, Jinjur was angry. "We don't have sheets to waste," she said. Later, she got an idea and amended the sign. "I like it. I think I will carry this one myself." She lifted her sign. "BAN THE BAUM!" it read.

"Hey, that's censorship," Gale said, looking up from her own bit of work.

"Not the books," Jinjur laughed. "I mean him personally."

By the time they set out, the sky was black as velvet shot with stars, the Milky Way so thick it was almost a belt across the sky. Gale had never seen so many stars before. She had never smelled night air so crisp and clear and scented by the trees. It heartened her for the trip, which was good, for she still wore her "comfortable" sandals. Dretin, too, seemed well able to make the journey.

So silent was the night that their footsteps echoed on the road and no one seemed disposed to talk. Spooky, who had the best eyesight, walked in the lead to warn them of any traps or pitfalls.

"Someone's coming," she soon said, running back to join her friends.

"It's Tik-Tok," Gale said, recognizing the copper man by the unique sound he made. A little while later he came into view, the bright stars echoed on his polished copper frame. Not knowing whether to be glad or worried, they stopped where they stood and waited.

"Princess Gale," he said, the moment he saw them, "you are under arrest!" He pointed to the words etched neatly on his chest. "As the official Army of Oz, I cannot allow you to start a revolution. In the name of Princess Ozma, I hereby do my duty." He grasped her arm in a painless, but firm grip, from which she could not pull away. "The rest of you must disperse," he said, and with that, he began pulling her toward the Emerald City.

"But I'm not trying to start a revolution," Gale said.

"Then you must tell them so at your trial, and you will surely be released," Tik-Tok answered. He neither tightened nor relaxed his grip, but continued on toward town.

"What shall we do now?" Silka said.

"I think we should kill him and make him give her back!" Toki said, starting off after them.

But Tik-Tok's hearing was very good. He stopped and turned around. "You cannot kill me," the copper army said, "for I have never been alive. You could try to stop me, but you would not succeed. It would be against the law for you to interfere with my duty, little boy. I would be forced to arrest you as well."

"Toki!" Dretin yelled, calling the boy back. He returned with an embarrassed look on his face. "Gale made us all promise that there would be no fighting," the woman continued in very hushed tones. "What was the word she used? Passive resistance?"

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"Gale carried off by a giant clock," Spooky said with a sigh. "It's almost appropriate for someone who never gets up on time."

"Giant clock?" Dr. Pipt asked.

"Well, a clockwork man. It was only a joke," the cat said.

"No, no, that's all right. A clockwork man? Hmmmmm," the former magician said. "Spooky, do you think you could delay them for a bit? I think I have an idea."

Spooky ran after the pair. Tik-Tok did not walk at great speed and Spooky was very fast. It did not take long before she was in front of them. The question now was, how to make the copper man stop? "Wait a minute," she said, unable to think of anything else.

"I am sorry, Miss Cat," Tik-Tok said. "Gale has been explaining to me what she is doing. I do not know if her actions are illegal, but Princess Ozma has sent me to make an arrest. I must do my duty. Her fate is no longer in my hands."

Embarrassed by her reaction to Spooky's support, Gale turned to hide her tears and noticed Toki sneaking up behind the copper man. To Gale's utter amazement, he began pounding on Tik-Tok's back, shouting "Let her go, you bully! Let her *go!*" There was just enough light for her to make out Drips climbing on the boy's shoulders. The water-child jumped on to the large machine-man, sliding through the crack between head and shoulders just as Tik-Tok swiveled his head around.

"I am sorry, little boy," Tik-Tok said.

"Oh, it's okay, I guess," the boy said. He reached out to pat the Army's shoulder. Only Gale noticed that Dretin's metal crochet hook followed Drips down the crack.

Once inside the metal casing, Drips got to work. She did not want to do anything that would break Tik-Tok, but it was very important that she stop him for a time. After all, he was pulling Gale. Drips liked Gale, so she looked around most carefully, and finding what she thought was the right spot, she shoved the crochet hook home.

Tik-Tok started off again, pulling Gale along. She was worried about Drips, now contained within his clockwork body. What was it she wanted to do? She hoped whatever plan they had hatched would not damage the copper man, for in reality Gale liked him quite a bit. Then suddenly, so suddenly that it almost knocked Gale over, Tik-Tok stopped. He let go of her hand and pitched over onto his face. Drips slid out from the hole where his arm and shoulder connected, and ran to Spooky's side.

"Oh dear," Tik-Tok said. "My action must have wound down. I was so sure I was fully wound when I left the Palace, but it is a long walk here and must have used more of my springs than I expected."

"You have not run down," Dr. Pipt said, as Gale's friends reached the place where she stood.

"It seems we've thrown a spanner into the works," Spooky said, having

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been informed by Drips. Somehow, she had cajoled the cat into giving her a ride on her back. "What is a spanner, anyway?" Spooky asked.

"You are not seriously damaged," Dr. Pipt continued. "We have merely placed a metal stick between two of your cogs so that they cannot turn. We promise to remove it as soon as we are done, but for now, I'm afraid, it must remain there." He helped the creature to his feet and dusted off his coppery chest. "I hope you are not too uncomfortable."

"I am not uncomfortable," Tik-Tok said. "I am sorry to have been defeated. Still, I wish you luck, so long as you promise to bring no harm to Ozma. Change can be a good thing, sometimes."

The first purple band of dawn was beginning to show in the sky when they reached the city gate. No one was there yet. Gale was inclined to worry, but this time even Spooky did not back her up. "Look how early it is," the cat said. "Even I wouldn't be up yet if I didn't have to be. Get some sleep. I'll wake you when things start to happen."

Gale agreed, but she was too nervous to sleep. She sat on the lawn watching the sun come up as the others talked and played. Toki had borrowed a red scarf from someone and tied it on his head pirate fashion. He was having a great time, fighting imaginary sword fights with some invisible foe. Spooky and Drips had become great friends. They ran back and forth on the lawn, the cat nipping at the child's heels only to find her prize snatched away as Drips's watery body slid between her teeth, whole and complete once more. Dretin lay under a bush fast asleep. The trip had been quite an ordeal for her. The others talked quietly amongst themselves.

As the sun rose higher in the sky, a few people came out to look. These were mostly Emerald City residents, and they seemed more curious than anxious to support them. Gale thought briefly about giving some rousing speech, working them up into action, but what was the point? It was fairly obvious that the birds had done their job. These people already knew what was happening. If they wanted to join her they would. She was so tired it was all she could do to keep her eyes open, and there were few people to work with anyway. How could she rouse someone else's spirits when her own were in decline? Maybe she was wrong. If most of the people of Oz really were content . . . No! That was the wrong way to look at it. Even if her group was in the minority, they had rights, too; or, at least, they should have. Besides, she had made a commitment. Whatever happened now, she was in it to the end. She looked up to see Dr. Pipt leaning over her.

"They want to join us," he said.

"Then why don't they?" Gale asked him, not quite sure he was right.

"Nobody wants to go first," he said. "They are waiting to see if anyone else is going to arrive before they commit themselves. Watch, I'll show you."

The old man took over. Gale had to admit that he handled the onlookers admirably. "Come," he said in a soft, gentle voice. "Sit on the steps.

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You need do nothing now, and you have nothing to fear. All we want you to do is sit on the steps and let Ozma know what is bothering you. Surely, if you are unhappy, your princess will *want* to know. You need not ever take part in anything that makes you uncomfortable, but for now, just come sit on the steps." And they did come into the park. Slowly, a few at a time, they climbed the steps and sat down. Gale had to marvel. How could Ozma fear the work of such a wonderful man? Gale certainly couldn't imagine him working evil magic. Shaking her head, she stood and followed the newcomers.

At least there were enough of them to block off that long, graceful flight of stairs leading up to the palace. She allowed the others to fill in the upper rows, making sure that she had a seat at the bottom, right in the center where she could set the tone for any encounter. Toki, Silka, and Jinjur had promised to go over things with everyone else. For the moment, Gale had to rest, though she was too tense, she was sure, to get any real use from her time. Nor was she sure she had covered all possibilities. She said as much to Spooky.

"Stop worrying," the cat said. "I can tell just by looking at you that you're too fogged to think straight. Sit down and try to relax until things get started."

Gale had to admit that the cat was right. Not that she'd be able to get even a minute of sleep. Still, she sat back, and put her hands out to grasp the hands of the folks on either side of her. With a note of surprise, she realized that she was no longer nervous. Off to the side, Drips was laughing. Somewhere a lovely soprano voice rang out in song. This was the way it ought to be. She found herself singing along and knew that, for the first time in a long while, she was having fun. Smiling, she leaned back on the knees of the person sitting behind her, and, that fast, she was sound asleep.

Glinda arrived on a palanquin of bright scarlet silk studded with jewels. The golden handles which held it aloft rested squarely on the shoulders of four Quadling men, equally matched in size and step so as not to jostle the sorceress as they walked. They laid the palanquin down just outside the city walls, and Glinda stepped out of it, herself arrayed in splendid finery. She was much surprised by the sight that greeted her. These were no raggle-taggle army brandishing pots and pans and knitting needles. Nor were they smartly dressed troops, armed with real weapons of any sort. In fact, they did not seem to be armed at all. Here were a mere handful of people who sat or stood about on the palace lawn, laughing, talking, and singing songs. Even Jinjur, who had been so sulky and defiant at their last such meeting, smiled at her apologetically before she shook Gale to wake her up. So *this* was Dorothy's offspring. Such ugly, mannish garments she wore. What manner of woman was this, who was trying to corrupt the honest, happy people of Oz? Glinda smiled grimly. Well, this was a corruption easily enough routed, cut away, like

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a disease, before it could infect anything else. She motioned to her captain of the guard.

Gale opened her eyes to find a hundred polished spears pointed at her head. She could feel the blood racing through her veins, her heart beating so hard that she could almost hear it. *This* was all too familiar. Afraid? Certainly she was, and yet there was something more. Something she couldn't quite put a name to.

It was already late in the day, and none of her expected allies had arrived. The citizens on the steps had moved as far from her as they could, and only Glinda's order of "Nobody move!" kept them from bolting entirely. Only her original friends showed any signs of determination as they stood on the sidelines, wringing their hands with worry. Then she heard Spooky start to growl. The sound heartened her. Whatever happened now, at least she was not alone. Gale stroked the cat's head to comfort them both. Then she looked up past the soldiers, into the face of her foe.

The woman who stood before her smiled down with a look of cool amusement. The look of a person who knew she had everything in hand. That she had the spears on her side. So this was Glinda. She looked nothing like Billie Burke, except for her fairytale outfit—not that Gale had expected her to. But she might, at least, have had the courtesy to look nasty. A sly sort of Richard Nixony "Would I lie to you?" kind of smile, or maybe an old-fashioned, school-teachery, rod-up-her-butt look in her eyes, a mouth that had eaten one lemon too many; that would have helped a whole lot. Instead, the witch of the south insisted on looking just like the nice, pleasant sort of woman that Gale would have liked for a neighbor—except, of course, for her obvious lack of taste in dress.

"Well, just what *do* you think you're doing here?" Glinda asked. She made no pretense of addressing the whole group, putting her question directly to Gale.

Gale's hands shook. No one was going to kill her for sitting on the palace steps, she told herself, then looked again at the gleaming spears and swallowed hard. The faces of the girls who held the weapons were serious enough. There was, in every one of them, the strained tension of a soldier at work. She tried her best to ignore them and speak directly to Glinda, but reminded herself not to make any sudden moves. The people of Oz might not be able to die, but she was a Kansas girl. "We are here on behalf of the people of Oz," she said, trying to keep any note of uncertainty out of her voice. She couldn't keep it out of her head. What had gone wrong? Had she really misjudged the situation so badly? Could it really be that with so few discontented people in all of Oz, she had met almost a third of them in one day? "We have not come here to start a war. We have merely come to speak with Princess Ozma. There are some demands we wish to make."

"On behalf of the people of Oz," Glinda laughed, glancing around her.

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It was, indeed, a merry chuckle. "Ozma, come out and see your rebellion. They will not harm you."

Something about Glinda's attitude made Gale brave. "She may listen at the doorway," Gale said, "but she may not come out, nor will we let anyone in until our demands are heard and a settlement reached."

"Now that is a silly thing to say," Glinda told her. "My army far outnumbers yours, and, as you can see, they are all well trained and well armed. I have only to give the word and you will be taken away by force and thrown into jail."

"If you wish to move me, you will have to use that force, for nothing else will make me leave," Gale said. Glinda smiled and raised her arm, as if to perform some act of magic, or order her troops to attack.

"Wait!" Gale said, not sure what made her do so. The movement was lost. All of her common sense told her so—but she didn't feel futile or defeated or depressed at all. She felt . . . alive! Moved by this sudden realization, her voice came strong and sure. Let them do to her what they would. They would know that they'd been in a fight! "Is Ozma so sure of herself, so certain that she knows what her people need, that she is *afraid* to even hear what we have to say?" She could hear a murmur run through the crowd, and a few of the braver souls even moved back by her side. At that moment, the palace doors opened wide, and a fanfare heralded Ozma's arrival.

Ozma appeared in the doorway, surrounded by her friends, and looked at Gale sadly. The child might have been about to burst into tears from the way her chin trembled, but her voice was steady as she spoke, not to Gale, but to the group of protesters. "I do not understand your actions here. I am always ready to hear your complaints and deal with your problems. Any of you might come to me, one at a time, and you will be heard."

To Gale's vast relief, Glinda gestured and the spears were lowered, but now her own tiny forces were moving toward the doors. "No!" Gale shouted, satisfied to see everyone stop in their tracks. "No, Ozma, that will not do. The laws of the land must be amended. The people must have rights, independent of your whims, however well-meaning they are."

"You claim that you come to represent the people, yet you bring with you only a handful. They are a group of malcontents, no more. Yet, as their ruler I would gladly listen to their woes and try to help them," Ozma said.

Gale had been afraid of this. The child sounded so reasonable, yet, Gale knew in her heart that somehow it wasn't right. Still, with so few supporters, she only had one card left. She played it. "Are the needs of the few less important than the needs of the many?" she asked.

This time it was Glinda who answered, but while her smile was warm and sympathetic, her voice was firm. "Yes," she said, softly, "if they endanger the needs of the majority."

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Gale sighed. The last time she'd heard these sentiments, they did not come from charming women and beautiful little girls.

"I've been patient long enough," Glinda said. "Even though I do believe that you *mean* no harm, this threat to the welfare of Oz cannot be allowed to continue. If you do not leave voluntarily, I shall be forced to have you removed."

Gale looked at Drips, a shining rainbow on Silka's shoulder, and at Toki, the boy who would never grow up unless she found a way to argue somewhat better than she had. At least *she* could go home and forget all about this. "Ozma," she began, stalling for time until she could think of what to say. "Your people must have a *voice* in their government. It is not enough for you to listen to their problems and grant dispensations. They need a Magna Carta, a Bill of Rights! Something written down in law so that all may know what they can and cannot do without asking your leave. And those rights and laws must be determined by the people themselves, through voting and representation!"

"Representation?" Ozma said, indignantly. "*I* represent my people. I keep watch in my magic picture. I *know* their needs. And, as you can plainly see, most of my subjects are content. They do not need a say in their government because they are *happy* to have me take that burden from their shoulders. Most people want someone to tell them what to do. It is *choice* that makes people discontent."

"Surely . . ." Gale started to say, but Jinjur interrupted her.

"Listen!" she said, motioning for silence. At first Gale wasn't sure why, but soon she, too, heard the noise in the distance. It seemed to be coming from all around them, a rolling din of voices from everywhere.

Suddenly, a mob appeared from the west, all carrying signs. They sang as they came, a song that Drips had asked the birds to teach them. The tune was a little ragged and they were certainly not all on the same timing, but the words were perfectly clear. "We shall overcome!" Then, from the north more people came, all dressed in purple and carrying signs that read **"GILLIKIN POWER!"** and **"MAGIC FOR THE MASSES!"** A woman in multi-hued splendor carried one that read **"BREAK THE COLOR BARRIER!"** People from all over Oz seemed to arrive at once. There was a boy about Toki's age with a sign that read **"HELL NO, WE *WILL* GROW!"**, and next to him, two more that said, **"WITCHES ARE PEOPLE, TOO!"** and **"MAGIC IS A RITE!"** One man fell to his knees in front of Gale and kissed her hand. "It took us a while to make the signs and learn the songs. I hope we are on time."

They filled the square in front of the palace and spilled into the streets and the yards of neighboring houses. Before long, the noise was almost deafening, but occasionally a voice carried over the general din. "We want free elections," someone said. "Rights of immigration," called another. "Freedom to pick our own jobs!" Drips got so excited that she jumped onto Silka's head and danced around in a circle scattering rainbows everywhere. "Up the rainbow!" one man yelled, and everybody

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laughed. They took up the chant, a rallying cry. "Up the rainbow!" they all shouted.

"Yesssss!" Gale said, bringing her fist down to her waist in a victory gesture.

Ozma looked lost. The Scarecrow patted her on the back, but she pulled away from him and raised her hands for quiet. More politely than any group of protesters Gale had ever seen before, they gave it to her. "I'm sorry to see that you have all been so unhappy," Ozma said. "I shall relinquish my crown at once and you shall find yourselves another ruler." She looked at Gale significantly.

Gale jumped to her feet. A fight she could have dealt with, but this was just too much. "Ozma, no one here wishes you to abdicate," she said, and a cheer went up from the crowd. Immediately, a chant of "Oz-ma, Oz-ma!" began, rising to an earsplitting crescendo. "You are sweet and kind and wise, and your people love you," Gale added.

"I . . . I don't understand," the child princess said, but a little of the sadness went out of her face, and she managed to put on a smile.

"Oz must have its Princess," Gale said, "but it must have protection for its people as well. For, while you are good and kind and sweet and wise, you have not been a princess to your people. You have been their mother. It's time for them to grow up. They must be able to decide for themselves what is right and wrong, good and bad for them. And, most important of all, they must have a governing body, to amend those laws in accordance with their needs."

"Than I shall keep my crown," Ozma said, with amazing dignity. "And I shall name an interim governor. Together, we shall help my people learn to rule themselves, with my help, of course." Another cheer was flung aloft, and it was quite some time before another word could be heard. "Gale," Ozma continued, when the noise died down, "you are more like your grandmother than I thought at first. I would like to offer you the governor's job. That is, if you can stay."

Gale smiled and looked down at Spooky, who nodded her encouragement. "Oh, only as long as I'm needed," she answered.

Gale knocked on the door to Ozma's study, and entered at her call. She was proud of the changes that she'd been able to make in the past three months, and not alone to the structure of the government. Thanks to Silka, the loose pants that Ozma was wearing had become quite a rage for both men and women, and there was more equality on the home front, as well. Not, perhaps, quite as much as Gale would have liked, but it was a start. Some things took time.

Tik-Tok bowed to Gale as she entered the room. "I am sorry I cannot stay, but I have much work to do," he said. Spooky sat on the desk like a library lion, not even looking up at Gale.

"Is everything ready?" Ozma asked.

"The Charter has been printed. It's ready for you to sign, and I must

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say you all did a wonderful job. They'd like to have the ceremony at three o'clock, if that's okay?"

"Yes, I've taken care of all the details. I am glad they want me to handle the ceremonies. That was always the most fun of all. And I've planned such a nice feast to follow." She seemed so happy that Gale hated to give her the news, but Ozma spotted the look in her eyes quickly enough. "You look worried, Gale. Is something the matter? The elections? I'm sure you're a shoo-in for Emerald City Councilman."

"Actually, Princess Ozma, I think it's time for me to leave," Gale said.

Spooky looked up at this. "I'm not going with you," she said.

"I know," Gale told her, "and I'll miss you, but I've been thinking about this a lot, lately, and I have to go back. They're screwing things up in the environment like crazy. Take the prairies, for instance. I know I can do something about that. At least, I have to try."

"Besides," she added with a wink for Ozma, "There's no place like home."

"Look out Kansas!" Spooky said. ●

(continued from page 89)

escapes, chases, near-abductions, con games, heroic quests, deadly dangers, and wild adventures, complete with space pirates, aliens, high-stake gamblers, computer gamers, knights in armor, genies, houris, vampires, and, of course, the eponymic Werewolves of Luna. Enjoy!

ALSO IN MID-DECEMBER: the King of Gonzo himself, cult favorite **Neal Barrett, Jr.,** returns to take us on a zany, high-speed tour of "Manhattan 99"; bestselling author **Alison Lurie** makes an impressive *Asimov's* debut with an intelligent, literate, and unconventional ghost story that examines those things that dwell "In the Shadow"; new writers **Mary Rosenblum** (one of our most popular authors) and **Greg Abraham** (making his *Asimov's* debut) join forces to take us to an impoverished, water-starved future America and there introduce us to its most unlikely inhabitant, the bizarre and wonderful "Mr. Sartorius"; new writer **Jamil Nasir** explores the ominous borderland between reality and dream, in company with "The Lord of Sleep"; new writer **Chris Willrich** makes a compelling *Asimov's* debut with a chilling look at a troubled boy who is suddenly gifted with a devestating and perhaps uncontrollable Power, the enigmatic "Little Death"; and, for *her* debut in *Asimov's,* new writer **Barbara Mater** takes us "Delving in the Dark." Plus a Guest Editorial by **Jim Cappio,** "A Few Months After 'Ten Years After'," **Robert Silverberg's** "Reflections" column, and an array of other columns and features.

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ON BOOKS

by Paul Di Filippo

Small Is Beautiful

A recent letter in *The New York Times Book Review* cited two incredible figures: fifty thousand small presses in the United States issue one hundred thousand books annually. Swamped by the output of richer, larger, more voracious publishers, these thousands of small-press books are often lost and ignored, undeservedly so in many cases. Luckily, the SF community has a warm spot in its heart for its own small publishers, and will support thoughtful, well-intentioned, sincere volumes from dedicated artists.

And maybe even something exactly the opposite, such as *Squashed Armadillocon* ($10.00, paperback, 151 pages, available from Hypatia Press, 360 West First, Eugene, OR 97401), written by Paul Riddell and illustrated by Ernest Hogan, author himself of such novels as *Cortez on Jupiter* (1990).

Written in the manner of Hunter Thompson, *Squashed Armadillocon* is a slash-and-burn, take-no-prisoners account of one man's descent into the SF-convention nightmare. Fueled by bile and bad hotel food, irate at what he perceives to be fools and dunderheads bent on destroying the literature he loves, Paul Riddell, accompanied by a motley crew of co-conspirators, spends three days launching gratuitous insults and cheap shots at fans, agents, publishers, and authors, in a hyperbolic, determinedly non-PC rant. He names names, points fingers and generally flails away in an entertainingly Stern (as in Howard) style, providing an antidote to the sometimes saccharine sweetness of the "SF is one big family" boosters.

Riddell's fellow Texas, Don Webb, is a man with a different methodology. Equally committed to raising standards within the field, Webb sets forth to do so by example, rather than polemic. Known for his off-kilter visions embodied in a controlled prose that is paradoxically more lunatic than any ravings, Webb has recently gifted us with another volume of short stories: *The Seventh Day and After* ($7.95, 78 pages, Wordcraft of Oregon, PO Box 3235, La Grande, OR 97850).

Webb's fiction is one where identities and landscapes shift and waver with dreamlike effects, and where the props burdening the characters are the everyday kipple and kitsch one hardly notices anymore: souvenir plastic tomahawks and melmac cups. In "An American Hero," the monarchy of Brooklyn finds its lost king. In "Beach

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Scene," two elderly fishermen quote Ovid and ponder mortality. In the title piece—dedicated to the magic realist Bioy Casares, with whom Webb obviously feels an affinity—a woman in a frozen apocalyptic landscape finds herself back in the "safe" past, only to suffer a strange fate. "The Protocols of Captain Whizzo" is a Burroughsian riff about control and domination. Five other small gems of mordant humor and subtle insight round out this cohesive and capable collection.

The Great Work of Time

John Crowley's brand of fantasy is unlike anyone else's. Understated, elegant, blended of whimsy and harshness, populated by characters alternately wise and blind, his books consistently deliver what other, more gaudy works only promise: a sensual and gut-level apprehension of how our current mundane world intersects and is perfused by an estranging magic, whether emanating from a parallel realm (Faerie in *Little, Big* [1981]) or from the past (as in *Aegypt* [1987]).

The rich, layered textures and mythic resonances of Crowley's fiction are hard-won by the author, not arriving easily or quickly—a lesson that many three-book-a-year writers might well profit from. Seven years after his last book, *Aegypt,* we now have the sequel: *Love & Sleep* ($22.95, hardcover, 503 pages, Bantam Books).

The wait was worth it.

At the end of *Aegypt,* heart-hurt loner and historian-*manqué,* Pierce Moffett, recently relocated to the arcadian town of Blackbury Jambs in the Faraway Hills, had just stumbled on a mysterious manuscript that neatly duplicated the very book he had been planning to write, a treatise on how our world has undergone dozens of magical paradigm shifts over the centuries. (The reader had also learned by then that Pierce is an incarnation of sorts of Percival, embarked on his own danger-fraught Grail-quest.) Cast adrift by this discovery, Pierce was left very much in suspension, a million unforeseen possibilities opening up before him, while others closed down.

A brief prologue to *Love & Sleep* locates Pierce visiting his mom in Florida, somehow in trouble and exiled from the Hills. But the next section jumps back to Pierce's already partially explored childhood (much in the way Ballard recapitulated Jimmy's camp experiences from *The Empire of the Sun* [1984] in the beginning of *The Kindness of Women* [1991]). This quarter of the book is simultaneously a beautiful and tender portrait of a lost era "only a decade deep," and an explanation of how Pierce's foot was first planted on the trail of arcane mysteries.

Meanwhile, as in *Aegypt,* excerpts from the works of fictional historical novelist Fellowes Kraft are intertwined, forming a contrapuntal narrative in which Doctor Dee and Giordano Bruno cross paths, the Philosopher's Stone is created, and an empire-shattering wind (felt all the way into Pierce's present) is raised.

When the Faraway Hills setting is regained, new characters are introduced—notably a mysterious and powerful Christian evangelist

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named Honeybeare—and the pressure of Pierce's quest for the secret history of our world(s) pushes him into a hazy land close to insanity, in which a mysterious phantom son who wears the likeness of an alchemical archetype appears. Falling in love not with Rosie Rasmussen (as was portended) but with her dark twin, Rose Ryder, whose desertion is the final blow in his unhinging, Pierce at novel's end is poised "to lose everything, mind as well as heart, occupation too," as the change-winds strip him down, perhaps in necessary preparation for eventual transcendence.

Although frequently seen as an old-fashioned author, Crowley exhibits a cheeky post-modernism at times, frequently cajoling his text into commenting on itself. In *Aegypt,* Crowley revealed his chosen scaffolding: "thematic repetition, the same ideas or events or even the same objects recurring in different circumstances, or different objects contained in similar circumstances." *Love & Sleep* hews to the same leisurely, recursive unfolding, obeying the notion that "the real connections between things [are] pattern, repetition, inversion, echo." This makes for a book totally at odds with the usual thud-and-blunder fantasy, yet one which will repay careful attention with even deeper emotions.

Stuffed with paradoxes (love and sleep are both the marks of our Gnostic exile and also humanity's saving graces), intensely inhabited by engaging characters, *Love & Sleep* will charm those already familiar with Crowley, but might not serve as the perfect introduction to his work, exhibiting some of the inconclusiveness characteristic of mid-series works.

With another book or two still projected in Pierce's tale, patient readers will have to wait until well into the next century for the conclusion of his quest. Considering the millennial nature of Crowley's themes, this seems altogether fitting.

Follow That Author!

Many SF writers have shown a predeliction and talent for the novel of psychological suspense. Most famous, natch, is Robert Bloch with *Psycho* (1959) and its sequels. Other worthy examples are L. Ron Hubbard's *Fear* (1940); Edgar Pangborn's *The Trial of Callista Blake* (1961); Theodore Sturgeon's *Some of Your Blood* (1961); and many of the mysteries of Frederic Brown. Now the field has two more fine entries sure to reward any reader who has enjoyed their authors' SF.

The Orchid Eater ($19.95, hardcover, 282 pages, St. Martin's Press) by Marc Laidlaw is, on the surface, a kind of *Dazed and Confused* seasoned with psychotics. Set in 1975 in the small California town of Bohemia Bay, its narrative jumps among that town's menagerie of teenage slackers and stoners; pre-AIDS hot-tubbing gays; and homegrown messiahs straight out of Flannery O'Connor. Dope, skateboards and anomie are rife; parents—single or sparring—are oblivious to the dark undercurrents among their children; and Jethro Tull blasts out of the eight-track. Into this lovingly rendered, closely observed and deeply felt wasteland, Laidlaw plays his wild

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card: a crippled and dangerous sociopath named Lupe.

Lupe is drawn to the town by the presence of his brother, Sal, a small-time drug dealer who masquerades as a vendor of black-velvet paintings. But the visit to his brother—a final desperate, yet half-hearted attempt at reconciliation, a last reaching-out—falls to pieces, and Lupe is soon cast adrift to pursue the one vocation remaining to him: ceremonial killings that add to his "collection."

Lupe, one soon learns, is accompanied by his "boys," the ghosts of those he has sacrifically slaughtered. Their reality, dubious yet vivid, is validated at the novel's end by the experiences of Mike James, Lupe's final victim (making the book a true fantasy, for those keeping score). This sly self-reference to Laidlaw's best-known story, "400 Boys," which can be found in *Mirrorshades* (1986), is just one of the neat kicks Laidlaw can be counted on to deliver in this twisting tale. A second is the wry gruesomeness of the title, which only becomes apparent gradually.

Eventually, Mike James becomes the most central character, as Lupe fixates on adding the youngster to his collection. Mike is well-drawn: all too often a weak follower, he can exhibit surprising strength, as at the book's invigorating climax. Directionless, he has the potential to discover his bliss. Laidlaw explicitly links Mike's character with that of Lupe, making it plain that one boy is merely the other under different circumstances. And here we come upon the key to the book's subtext.

The Orchid Eater is really a novel protesting injustice. Lupe's fate is sealed in the urban jungle of his youth, where poverty, discrimination and endemic violence shatter and warp his future. Bohemia Bay, seemingly paradise, is in reality a hotbed of hypocrisy and ill-wind, as testified to by the ugly treatment of the gays there, especially in the scene where Sal brings one of the survivors of Lupe's attacks to the hospital. Unleashed on this placid sanctuary, Lupe is a kind of society-spawned plague of Biblical proportions. By underpinning the taut muscles of his enthralling plot with a skeleton of social commentary, Laidlaw has ennobled what is all too often a mindless genre.

In this, he harks back to such illustrious predecessors as Jim Thompson and Ross MacDonald. Adding his own patented brand of sometimes hallucinatory prose—Mike's inadvertant LSD trip, wherein he suspects he has met his Jungian anima, is masterfully done—Laidlaw has conjured up a multileveled thriller out of our cultural detritus and shared shame.

In *X,Y* ($4.99, paperback, 340 pages, Dell Abyss) Michael Blumlein—well-known for his collection, *The Brains of Rats* (1989) and first novel, *The Movement of Mountains* (1987)—has written a novel of what might be profitably dubbed "neurohorror." The impetus of his plot is neither supernatural nor what is commonly thought of as psychotic behavior, though there is plenty of that as well by the book's end. Rather, Blumlein's terror spins inevitably out of the kind of quirky, horrifying structural brain failure made familiar

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to the general reader by the writings of Doctor Oliver Sacks. (A practicing MD himself, Blumlein has outfitted his novel with actual scholarly endnotes, perhaps a first for the psychothriller genre.)

The androgynously named Frankie de Leon is an exotic dancer in a seedy New York club. While performing late one night, after consuming almost a whole bottle of Jack Daniel's, she is cast into convulsions and subsequent coma by the piercing warble of a strange siren. At the same time, a man in the audience undergoes a similar fit.

Dragged home by her lover, Terry, a failed med student who diagnoses fatigue and alcohol poisoning, Frankie awakens next day as a near-total amnesiac who is convinced of one thing only: that she is a nameless man without a recoverable past, trapped in a woman's body.

Has Frankie exchanged souls with the stricken man in the audience? Or is her problem a kind of psychic hemorrhage, an atavistic blowout? Whichever the case, Frankie is now a kind of helpless monster, a loveless, confused, ultimately quite dangerous victim of her own neural rewiring. For a time, she and a disbelieving Terry concentrate on the first possibility. Ultimately, they find the man from the audience and attempt a voodoo swap of his and Frankie's personalities, following the instructions of a conjure woman they are directed to by a friend named Marcus. (Marcus provides the few notes of humor in this grim novel, sounding and functioning rather like the sidekick Hawk in Robert Parker's Spenser books.)

When this transfer fails, Terry and Frankie spiral down into a sick swamp of unsparingly detailed abuse, role-reversal and madness, whose ending provides either a note of hope or a forecast of perpetual feasting upon each other's misery—depending, I guess, upon the reader's angle of vision.

One of Blumlein's triumphs is convincingly portraying how blind and deaf all of us are to real changes in those we are most familiar with. The way Frankie's mother refuses to see the horrendous alterations in her daughter's personality is typical of how familiarity can breed a failure of attention which in some cases proves very dangerous. Consider mass-murderers whose spouses and relatives swore they never had a clue.

I had two minor problems with this otherwise compelling book. One is the lack of empathy possible with Frankie. Because she vanishes in Chapter One, before it's possible to get to know her, the original Frankie remains a cipher whom it is hard to mourn. In fact, Blumlein consistently refers to Frankie with masculine pronouns after her transformation. Mostly this works, although some confusion is present when Terry and Frankie are alone, and back-references become tangled.

Another is that the investigation of what a sex-role reversal means never really moves much deeper than a literal Charles Bronson versus *Cosmopolitan* magazine dichotomy that Blumlein sets up. I recently had the pleasure of rereading Thorne Smith's wonderfully loony *Turnabout* (1931),

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which dramatizes a man-woman swap in a way so fresh it rings true even today. On the level of social-realism, Blumlein's book suffers by comparison.

But in the end, I have to concede that this is not what Blumlein really set out to do. His style is more Ballardian, more Kafkaesque: in a detached, clinical manner (he interpolates short relevant textbook-style essays into his narrative), he presents us with an enigmatic parable that rubs our noses in the sheer perverseness of our bodies and the behavior they can foment. Frail vehicles subject to mystifying disasters, our bodies can betray us into a land of nightmares.

If you've ever wondered what would happen if Gregor Samsa met the Hunger Artist, then you'll find *X, Y* your cup of peptides.

Fantasies Old, New, and Ethnic

The history of fantastic literature is studded with splendid eccentrics. One thinks of Austin Tappan Wright, David Lindsay, Dion Fortune, Conger Beasley, Jr., John Uri Lloyd and Leslie Barringer. The prototype, of course, is H. P. Lovecraft, whose posthumous fame is the exception rather than the rule.

To this list must now be added a name new to me, that of Kenneth Morris, whose final novel, *The Chalchiuhite Dragon* ($12.95, trade paper, 291 pages, Orb/Tor) languished in manuscript from the author's death in 1937 until its hardcover publication in 1992. Now, a handsome softback with a Richard Powers cover makes its appearance.

Dragon is the story of the events among pre-Mayan, pre-Aztecan Central Americans leading up to the birth of the Christ-like Quetzalcoatl, savior of the race. Based on the best scholarship of the period, but substantially flavored with Morris's own Theosophical musings, the book is written in a style which is a curious amalgam of mystical, not inelegant oratory (in such chapters as "The Master") to more prosaic infodumping ("A Huitznahuatec Market Day"). But somehow the mix succeeds in conveying what Morris calls "a world so goldenly holy," closer to the divine than ours is today. This is a universe where mountaintops are still sacred places, and the God of Puma Rock watches over travelers on the Road. Although the characters are convincingly earthy and concerned with such mundane affairs as gardening and weaving, salt-making and war, they also find themselves prodded by instructions from their dreams and by daily daylight epiphanies.

Morris's central conceit is the imaginary kingdom of Huitznahuacan, a blissful Shangri-la where violence is unknown, ruled by the noble queen and king Chimalman and Nopal, the future parents of Quetzalcoatl, who will soon be the sole legacy of their kingdom. For the warlike Toltecs—the shameful progenitors of the worst faults of the United States, one feels, with their overemphasis on science and commerce—have gotten word of the secluded land and have resolved to conquer it—as they eventually brutally do.

The elaborate, eventful story of how Huitznahuacan meets its end—a story which is a frighten-

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ingly prescient rendering of Tibet's actual takeover by Communist China a decade and a half after this work was written—forms the main thread of the narrative. Morris's tone is surprisingly upbeat for such a tragedy until one realizes that he firmly believes that all the suffering is prelude for a greater glory. "Huitznahuac was holy, and is dead. When that which is holy dies, the world is lighted. Passing into the Light of Light, holiness holds open the gates, and the glory streams through into our darkness to purify us."

This quote might give some sense of the proto-New Age tenor of *Dragon,* which should find a wide audience today. (Morris, a Welshman, lived in California for twenty-two years, at the Theosophical Society headquarters, and must have imbibed that state's heady atmosphere of Physical Culture, Radionics, etc.) But Morris's insights and faith, it is soon apparent, were based on valid personal inner struggles, and still ring true. He is particularly adept at conveying the slippery nature of visionary states, especially when Chimalman and Nopal try to explain to each other how they lost three days wandering on Mishcoatepetl as in a dream.

It's hard to place an outsider into a lineage. I would bet, based on a chapter such as "The Little Gods of Forgotten Plain," that Morris was influenced by Lord Dunsany. At times, he also sounds like Clark Ashton Smith. As for heirs who probably never read him, I would nominate Fritz Leiber in his Fafhrd and Gray Mouser mode, and still active today, the uniquely visionary A. A. Attanasio, as well as any other writer who chooses to hew to his inner voices in the service of some larger power.

With the publication of *The Belly of the Wolf* ($20.00, hardcover, 187 pages, William Morrow and Company), R. A. MacAvoy has completed what I would have to call the first post-*Neveryona* fantasy trilogy. By this, I mean that she has clearly signaled her intentions to follow the example Samuel Delany set in his own densely recomplicated series. Tipoffs include the name of the protagonist's homeland (Velonya) and such tropes as collar-loving slaves.

Similar to but more culturally advanced than Delany's almost pre-literate milieu, the lucid, intricate world MacAvoy has created (a world reminiscent of pre-industrial Eastern Europe, all Balkan duchies and nomadic plainsmen, with a smattering of exotic southerners) exists not so much as the simplistic scene of high deeds of derring-do—although there are such thrilling feats aplenty—but as a crucible in which matters anthropological, sociological, metaphysical, and spiritual can be mixed and alloyed into a strange shining amalgam that is plainly fantasy despite a lack of more overt sorceries. (MacAvoy's dragons, for instance, turn out on closer examination to be very large swine!).

In the first volume, *Lens of the World* (1990), the reader was introduced to Nazhuret: orphan, outcast, halfbreed. We followed him through an early military apprenticeship and a much stranger one under his mysterious master, Powl, which left him a self-pos-

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sessed adept of many skills, not the least of which were martial. In *King of the Dead* (1991), Nazhuret and his mate, Arlin—no average lady herself, and much given to masquerading as a man (in the manner of an author who uses only the initial letter of Roberta?)—find themselves in the midst of a complicated war they eventually succeed in bringing to a just ending.

A large chunk of time separates the action of the first two books, and the disjunction between second and third is even larger and more poignant. Nazhuret is now fifty-five, Arlin and Powl are dead, and a grown daughter, Navvie, is introduced. In many ways, she functions plotwise as her mother did (even to the occasional male disguise), charming foil to Nazhuret's singlemindedness, but is more waiflike than her mother, in the manner of one of Jack Vance's tough-as-nails heroines. Her absence from center-stage for a major portion of the book seems to me a tactical error on MacAvoy's part.

Haunted by literal ghosts and by the religion spawned by his pirated memoirs (much as Frank Herbert's Dune Messiah was), Nazhuret finds himself reluctantly abandoning a secluded professorial existence to once more serve as "the lens through which the world may become aware of itself," perhaps finding a measure of real peace by book's end.

MacAvoy's prose is not as dense as Delany's, but is equally well-crafted, delighting in precisely evocative verbs and descriptions. Rich metaphors abound; consider Nazhuret's description of the changes time has wrought on him: "When I was young the world around me was a piercing thing. . . . Now life tends to hit me like a dull drubbing on the back." Also akin to Delany, MacAvoy likes to fashion an elaborate conceit which becomes a means of crystallizing observation: for instance, the way Count Dinaos is said to "paint" with the food on his plate.

There is a Zen koan which asks how one can take the first step off the top of a hundred-foot pole. MacAvoy has succeeded in showing us the answer to this mysterious question with Nazhuret's miraculous life, lived in the silence contained within "the belly of the wolf."

Trolling the mainstream for fantasy fiction can be an agreeable pursuit. In this instance, I was rewarded by the discovery of the work of Ana Castillo, whose books —publisher-pigeonholed as Feminist Chicana Fiction—will certainly never be found in the SF rack, but are indisputably worthy of your attention.

Castillo's first novel, *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986), told the story of the uneasy friendship between Teresa and Alicia and their travels through Mexico. The fantasy elements occur during their stay in the strange city of Babylonia, where their encounter with a ghost that manifests itself as a "dark coagulation" is truly frightening. Notable also for its form—forty letters that may be read in any of several orders as an approximation of hypertext—Castillo's first book showcased her poetical dexterity with language and deftness with characterization.

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Sapogonia ($9.95, trade paper, 368 pages, Anchor Books), Castillo's second novel, is the story of one Maximo Madrigal, native of Sapogonia, an imaginary land "in the Americas where all mestizos reside." The creation of imaginary countries is an honorable tradition in SF (most recently seen in Lisa Goldstein's *Tourists* [1989]), and Castillo does the job well—insofar as she choses to. When we get a chance to visit Sapogonia, we find it an enticing, palpable land, where luminescent frogs sing in guttural choruses and Maximo's dead grandmother prepares his favorite meal for him as a final gift. Unfortunately, in a move that reveals more than anything the difference between mainstream and SF esthetics, Castillo, having created such a resonant land, sets most of the book's action in the U.S. and Europe, where Maximo undergoes various transformations of spirit and personality, much in the manner of the Kid in Delany's *Dhalgren* (1975).

Forever joining and separating from a mysterious woman named Pastora Ake, who plays the goddess Coatlicue to Maximo's Tezcatlipoca, Maximo runs through half a dozen careers and as many women, in a way which Castillo plainly does not endorse, but does not fully condemn either. Her writing hews to no PC guidelines, but is determinedly individualistic, rather in the manner of Kathy Acker. Castillo's prose is not as fragmentary as Acker's, however, always maintaining a seductive narrative flow. Jumping between first, second, and third person points-of-view, sometime within the same paragraph, Castillo exhibits both a flair for depicting the clash of personalities and a wry sense of humor. "Almost every Spaniard I met was either an aspiring guitarist or a would-be bullfighter who'd missed his calling. Can you imagine going to have your appendix out by a guy who really wanted to be a bullfighter . . .?"

Castillo calls her book "the story of make-believe people in a real world; or, if you like, the story of real people in the make-believe world." While wishing there had been more of the latter, I heartily recommend this book.

Two Generations of Gonzo

The Gonzo Credo, as I grok it, can be summed up in three rules:

1) The facts will take care of themselves; the writer's job is to get the feeling.

2) Life is weird; art has to be weirder.

3) Put yourself on the line.

By these laws, Rudy Rucker has to be judged the Reigning King of Gonzo SF.

In a distinguished career stretching back now nearly twenty years, polymath Rucker—the other arrows in his quiver include hacking, teaching, and writing mind-warping nonfiction—has done more than any other SF writer of his generation to pry and poke into the gnarly substrata of consciousness and reality (that might very well be one and the same). His latest book, *The Hacker and the Ants* ($20.00, hardcover, 320 pages, AvoNova) continues to mine this rich vein.

Hacker functions as a kind of pre-

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quel to Rucker's *Software* (1982) and *Wetware* (1988). In the earlier books, we saw a robot culture at full evolve. In the new one, the reader finds himself in at the creation of the first fully autonomous robots, mankind's heirs, the product of The Great Work, a mystico-alchemical term Rucker employs for the creation of silicon sentience.

Of course, this being Gonzo (or Transreal or Freestyle) SF, things do not go smoothly. Master hacker Jerzy Rugby (who is of course more than a tad autobiographical) is manipulated, coerced, threatened, spied-upon, and generally harrassed by contending forces who wish to use his skills for their own ends. Not the least of these manipulators turns out to be his old employer, Roger Coolidge of GoMotion (a hilarious parody, I'm certain, of one Mr. Gates and his Microsoft), who has unleashed on cyberspace the A-Life ants of the title, which are like demonic Energizer Bunnies in their predeliction for subverting reality, both virtual and physical.

One of the truly gratifying things about all of Rucker's books is how closely and loyally they hew to genre tropes while at the same time outstripping them. Like many of Rucker's figures, Jerzy Rugby is straight out of the Henry Kuttner school of drunk geniuses (see Kuttner's Gallegher stories). The VR construct known as Perky Pat is lifted intact from a famous Phil Dick story. And the changes Jerzy is put through basically conform to your standard hero-falls-from-elite-status-and-becomes-a-rebel SF plot. But Rucker's twists on these staple elements are so mind-boggling and fresh that it's as if no one has ever done them before.

As far as putting oneself on the line goes, Rucker is unsentimental, unsparing, and clear-eyed about his protagonist's—and by extension, his own—failings of spirit and motive. I defy anyone to show me another SF book in which the hero, recovering from a VR episode in which he messes himself with diarrhea, regards himself and thinks, "My stomach looked fat and vulnerable." Rucker's sense of sorrowful compassion makes his books ones in which everyone—and no one—is truly to blame for the mess the world is in.

When I said that Gonzo writers believe in letting the facts take care of themselves, I did not mean that they believe that facts can be ignored, but rather that a Gonzo writer gives facts their exact due and no more, employing them effectively without letting them dominate. You can watch Rucker doing this in his depiction of cyberspace, which has a full set of hard-edged specs. This is a book, after all, in which the author speculates on how many multi-dimensional variables it would take to drive a mannequin's lifelike expressions (thirteen).

Rudy Rucker's fiction runs at teraflop speed on God's own platform.

If the script of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988) had been co-written by Roald Dahl, Stanislaw Lem, and Ron Goulart, the result might very well resemble Jonathan Lethem's first book, *Gun, With Occasional Music* ($19.95,

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hardcover, 218 pages, Harcourt Brace & Company).

Starting from a base of hard-boiled detective fiction (a loony opening quote from Chandler sets the tone), Lethem proceeds to flesh out one of the more unsavory worlds lurking in our future. Operating initially in Major Goof Mode, Lethem comes gradually to emphasize his world's genuinely nasty edges—a strategy which by novel's end, when the protagonist has undergone a shocking displacement, has perhaps removed the book from the realm of Gonzo to actual and affecting Dystopia.

In the world inhabited by Private Inquisitor Conrad Metcalf, Muzak has infilitrated all audiovisual media, resulting in orchestral newscasts, abstract TV, and newspapers filled with captionless photos. Asking questions is a forbidden act, save to those of the Inquisitor's Office and to the few independent PI's like Metcalf. Artificially evolved animals (who function much like the Toons in *Roger Rabbit,* a tragicomic underclass) and artificially evolved children— "babyheads" —mingle with the repressed normal humans, neurotics who all suffer from this society's absurdist strictures.

In this milieu, Lethem sets spinning a gripping plot worthy of Chandler at his most circuitous and recomplicated. The tightrope to walk in the fusion genre of SF-mystery is always strung between the twin poles of SF sense of wonder and typical mystery frissons. One can easily overpower the other, in which case the author probably would have been better off writing either a straight mystery or a straight SF novel. But Lethem pulls off the synergistic trick of fusing the two, as plot and milieu kick each other up to higher energy levels.

Lethem plays many new riffs on the *noir* standards. Most hard-boiled detectives are wounded, psychically or physically. Metcalf's wound is uniquely SF. Oftentimes, murders have a way of going awry; the central murder in Lethem's book, that of Maynard Stanhunt, has a solution possible only when given Lethem's core SF assumptions.

There are a few false notes. Is "photostat" still a viable term in a high-tech world? Can "junkie" be a pejorative when drugs are legal? And exactly how does one analyze a chemical sample under a light microscope? But these flaws are minor, compared to Lethem's sly and intelligent deployment of clues and kicks. (The usual nightclub-embossed book of matches is replaced by a token drug-snorting straw, for instance.)

Unlike Rucker, whose touchstone decade is the sixties, Lethem reveals a definite Gen X sensibility on every page. Metcalf sharing his waiting room with a dentist can be nothing else than a Bob Newhart tribute, for instance. And the outré Chandlerian metaphors he employs are not cleverness, but a self-reflexive, postmodern tic.

In a field too often dominated by entrenched elders, Lethem comes across as a much-needed fresh voice and talent.

Poe-etic Justice

I like the weird fiction of Thomas

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Ligotti because it's retro without being fake, antique yet completely relevant to these waning days of a terrifying century. Perhaps "timeless" is the adjective I'm searching for. He faithfully and fruitfully carries forward a tradition of lapidary decadence that extends back to E. T. A. Hoffman and includes J. K. Huysmans, M. R. James, Lovecraft, and even that unacknowledged *Weird Tales* alumnus, Jorge Luis Borges.

Noctuary ($18.95, hardcover, 194 pages, Carroll and Graf) is the new collection of his short fiction (credits are lacking on the copyright page, or I'd mention some of the sources), which includes a novella original to the volume.

Ligotti sets his fiction in a subtle and evocative neverland of shadows and nightmares, necropoli and dusty studios, wet streets and fog-enshrouded mansions. Not for him the vampires of Akron or werewolves of Podunk. You won't find a single familiar place name or institution here, no brand names or common appliances. Ligotti's dream-wracked victims—Lovecraftian Outsiders all—inhabit a psyche-shaped universe whose "true destiny [is] disintegration" ("Mad Night of Atonement").

In a convincing preface, Ligotti lays out his unique theory of weird fiction—a term he apparently prefers to the debased one of "horror"—then proceeds to satisfy it in spades. His language is thick, but never clotted: in a story like "The Voice in the Bones" it precisely mimics, through a profusion of clauses, the character's confusion as he stumbles through a strange mazy house. Odd constructions such as "worshipant" and "luminousness" are judicious seasonings. Sometimes, the intensity of a prose poem is achieved.

Ligotti can be piquant: "The front windows of stores were cloudy with a confusion of reflected images from someplace else." ("The Tsalal"). Ligotti can be wry: "Afterward money would be collected from the visiting spectators, who were sworn to secrecy before they were allowed to witness this marvel. Still later they would be assassinated to insure the inviolable condition of their vow." ("The Unfamiliar"). Ligotti is one of those rare writers who delight in true chaos and mystery, however stygian, and can infect a reader with it.

A Freeway Odyssey and Four Holocausts

Nothing much really surprises me in SF anymore. There's pleasure aplenty, yes. But surprise, no. However, I *was* startled to find that Octavia Butler's wire-taut, headstrong and heartfelt new novel, *The Parable of the Sower* ($19.95, hardcover, 304 pages, Four Walls Eight Windows) owes more to Robert Heinlein's *Farnham's Freehold* (1964) than to, say, Alice Walker or Toni Morrison, writers with whom she might be expected—by the unenlightened—to share sensibilities.

Parable is the story of Lauren Olamina, a young woman coming of age in an America gone to hell. Armed enclaves offer the only precarious security in a world of rapists (who seem, contrary to history, uninterested in available boyflesh), cannibals, and marauders.

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Given the chance to attain her majority in relative peace, Lauren develops into a woman with a literal Destiny. Formulating her own unique philosophy/religion, training herself to be the very model of Heinlein's Competent (Wo)Man, she is one of the few prepared to survive upon the destruction of her walled burb, which sends her and a ragtag assortment of companions on a quest down ruined highways for a safe place to found a community based on her well-articulated and intriguing Earthseed principles.

It's hard to overstate the Libertarian components of this book. Lauren is fond of statements such as "Armed people do get killed . . . but unarmed people get killed a lot more often," and "If they have manners or if they can learn manners, we keep them. If they're too stupid to learn, we throw them out." RAH himself couldn't have phrased it any more clearly. (And as in *Farnham's*, there's even a hint of incest, as Lauren falls in love with a man who she explicitly states resembles her dead father.) If Lauren, as an oppressed African-American female, has perhaps more justification for such hardnosed sentiments, they are still a bit grating at times, especially when applied to the Great Unwashed Masses who brutally threaten every step of Lauren's journey.

One might also question whether this anarchic scenario (which has cropped up lately in stories by women writers as diverse as Tiptree and Kress, making me think that civilization is indeed a female-oriented, -sustained and -lamented construction) would ever really be able to perpetuate itself. The high birthrate amid chaos which Butler postulates, for one thing, is directly contradicted by the recent Russian experience, where social unrest has brought a decline in births.

But neither Libertarian overtones nor minor implausibilities can detract from the power of Butler's story of survival through apocalypse, followed by rebirth, which is one of the classic SF themes. Told entirely as entries from Lauren's diaries, the narrative never flags. The blood spilled in Butler's book comes not from SFX squibs, but from living, distinct humans. The sex, the dirt, the thirst are all immediate and real. Butler pretty much achieves what Lauren aspires to: "I'm trying to speak—to write—the truth. I'm trying to be clear."

In his intriguing introduction to Geoff Ryman's *Unconquered Countries* ($20.95, hardcover, 275 pages, St. Martin's Press), Samuel Delany claims that the four novellas therein are linked by a dynamic tension between a privileged land and a worse one. While true, what struck me more strongly was the sense that all four stories harrowingly depict holocausts of one sort or another, and together form a catalogue of the kinds of persecution humankind is capable of.

"A Fall of Angels" tells of the forced relocation of a unique sentient sun-dwelling being.

"Fan" shows how the near-contemporary entertainment industry effectively usurps reality and creates zombie masses.

"O Happy Day!" most explicitly

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stages a literal holocaust, as a female-run society exterminates violence-bearing males.

And "The Unconquered Country" recasts the genocidal tragedy of Cambodia in surrealistic biotech terms.

Gloomy scenarios all, to be sure, and such scant descriptions would be likely to get Ryman tagged as one of the British School of doom purveyors who are always out to undercut SF's inherent optimism. But on closer reading, Ryman's visions all offer realistic hopes and at least some slim solace. Raul Kundara of "Angels" emerges from his experiences on Hellespont with new self-knowledge. Billie triumphs over her delusions in "Fan." The gay quislings in "Day" escape their camp for however temporary a freedom. And Third Child survives her country's horrendous Year Zero, where the killing fields must one day grow grass again.

Ryman's prose is immaculate and controlled, his humor mordant. (This makes the odd bit of sentimentalism, such as Royce's sappy story in "Day" about prisoners "putting on a show" all the more glaring.) He can instantly summon up the claustrophobic feel of the Station in "Day" by saying its walls were painted a "musty pistachio." Or he can conjure up Phil Dick weirdness as deftly as the Master, such as in the scene in "Country" where living medical instruments are led to their death.

This collection will horrify, captivate, and ultimately inspire the reader with the depths of Ryman's insights into our potential for both shameful and redemptive behavior.

Reclaiming the Past

One reason why I date all my references to older books mentioned in this column is to try to convey a sense of history in a field that has lately come to discard much of its past. As the classics of the genre are allowed to drop out of print, newer readers are presented with a misleadingly one-dimensional froth of new books.

Two companies are bucking this trend, and deserve notice for trying to preserve SF's roots.

Carroll and Graf publishes a series called Masters of Science Fiction, inexpensive paperback reprints. Two of the latest, both books I had a chance to enjoy over twenty-five years ago, are John Wyndham's 1955 *The Chrysalids* ($3.95, 200 pages) and Clifford Simak's 1965 *All Flesh Is Grass* ($4.95, 255 pages).

Collier Books offers the Collier Nucleus program, trade paperback reissues. A fine new entry is *Deus Irae* ($8.00, 182 pages), the 1976 collaboration between Philip K. Dick and Roger Zelazny.

Get back to where you once belonged. . . . ●

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Another big Halloween con(vention) weekend is almost at our throats. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on clubs and fanzines, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 101 S. Whiting #700A, Alexandria VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 461-8645. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons with music keyboard as Filthy Pierre.

—Erwin S. Strauss

OCTOBER 1994

14-16—**NecronomiCon.** For info, write: **Box 2076, Riverview, FL 33569.** Or phone: **(813) 677-6347** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Tampa FL (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Airport Holiday Inn. Guests will include: George R. R. Martin, Timothy Zahn.

14-16—**FarPoint. (410) 799-2869.** Hunt Valley Inn, near Baltimore MD. Takei, Visitor, J. Brandis.

14-16—**ArenaCon. (718) 881-4575.** Holiday Inn Jetport, Elizabeth NJ. Miniatures and other gaming.

14-16—**Space Development Conferences. (215) 625-0670.** Phila. PA & Harley Hotel in Cleveland OH.

14-16—**ConTact. (812) 425-2715.** Ramada on US 41, Evansville IN. Dr. Bill Breuer, R. Van Tilburg.

21-23—**ConCat. (615) 522-3470.** Knoxville TN. George Alec Effinger, Timothy Wilson, Wendy Webb.

21-24—**AlbaCon.** At the Central Hotel, Glasgow, Scotland, UK. Robert (Mythadventures) Asprin.

22-24—**VulKon. (305) 434-6060.** Ft. Lauderdale, FL. A commercial Star Trek event.

27-30—**World Fantasy Convention, Box 791302, New Orleans LA 70179. (504) 769-3766.**

28-30—**Somewhere in Time Weekend, % Grand Hotel, Mackinac Island MI 49757. (800) 334-7263.**

28-30—**Big "E" Con, Box 10658, Towson MD 21285. (410) 825-3017.** Norfolk VA. See USS Enterprise.

28-30—**HanseCon, % Marwitz, Box 1524, Ahrensburg 2070, Germany. (04531) 86106.**

28-30—**Who's Seven, Saunders, 24 Forest Glade, Leytonstone London E11 1LU, UK. (081) 558-0796.**

28-30—**ValleyCon, Box 7202, Fargo ND 58109. (701) 281-0806.** R. Kamak, Zucker-Reichert, Elmore.

29—**When Worlds Collide, BSTA, Box 1108, Boston MA 02103.** Days Inn, Newton MA. Halloween party.

29-30—**Transylvania, 1 Elm Grove, Hildenborough TN11 9HE, UK.** Hammersmith UK. Rocky Horror.

29-30—**Adventurers' Inn, Box 1654, Ceres CA 95307. (510) 489-6546.** Livermore CA. Live-act games.

29-30—**ConCinnity, 26076-72 Robertson Rd., Nepean ON K2H 5Y8.** For fans of hard-science fiction.

NOVEMBER 1994

4-6—**VulKon, 12237 SW 50th, Cooper City FL 33330. (305) 434-6060.** St. Petersburg FL Trek event.

4-6—**EclectiCon, % Agel, 9-11 Ayres, Bayonne NJ 07002.** Airport Ramada, Newark NJ. For media fans.

4-6—**ConTradiction, Box 100, Bridge Stn., Niagara Falls NY 14305. (716) 285-2290.** Resnick, Kagan.

4-6—**ConStellation, Box 4857, Huntsville AL 35815. (205) 852-5006.** The Robinsons, Zahn. On campus.

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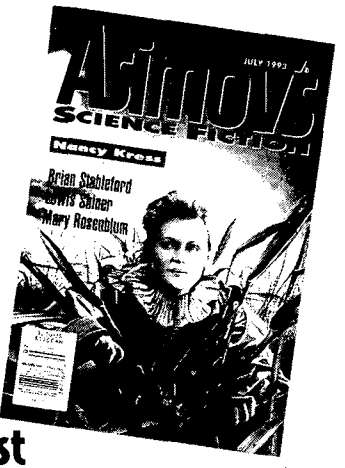

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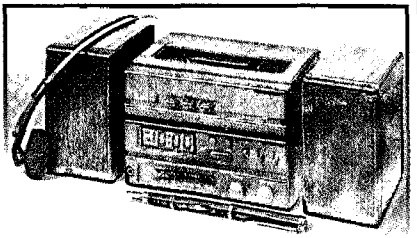

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